

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

THE NETWORKS OF A THAI BUDDHIST MONASTERY: COMMUNITIES, MATERIAL  
CULTURE, AND CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE AT WAT PHRA MAHATHAT  
WORAMAHAWIHAN, NAKHON SI THAMMARAT, THAILAND

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

KELLY MEISTER BRAUN

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

DECEMBER 2018

Copyright © 2018  
Kelly Meister Brawn

All rights reserved

For Tim, my great love

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF IMAGES.....	vi
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vii
LIST OF TABLES.....	viii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	ix
ABSTRACT .....	xii
NOTES ON TRANSCRIPTION .....	xv
CHAPTER	
ONE INTRODUCTION .....	1
The Layout of Wat Phra That .....	8
Early Background .....	17
Approaches and Methods .....	20
Summary of Chapters .....	23
TWO CONCEPTUALIZING INTERSECTIONAL THERAVĀDA: HOW THE CHRONICLES OF NAKHON AND ITS 84,001 RELICS CONSTRUCT COMMUNITY .....	26
On the <i>Crystal Sands</i> Manuscripts .....	28
Relic Tales in the Intersection .....	31
Intersectional Theravāda .....	40
Conclusion .....	53
THREE	
A MATERIAL NODAL NETWORK, IMMATERIAL POTENCY, AND THE UTILITY OF A MONASTIC SPACE .....	55
The Dynamics of Potency .....	60
The Nodal Network .....	65
Object Agency and the Study of Religious Materials .....	71
How Important is the Buddha to His Relics? .....	79
Entreating Objects for Aid and Cultivating the Self .....	90
Conclusion .....	106
FOUR	
LOCAL HERO(INE)S AS BUDDHAS: DUAL IDENTITIES OF BUDDHAS IN ROYAL DRESS .....	107

The Wandering Ascetic in Royal Finery: A Prototype of Ambiguity and Duality .....	113
A Hero and a Heroine Become Buddhas .....	124
Conclusion .....	138

FIVE

LOCAL PERSPECTIVE DURING THE EARLY STAGES OF A WORLD HERITAGE SITE NOMINATION .....	139
Creating Local and World Heritages .....	146
Proud to Promote: Advocates for World Heritage .....	152
Regulations, Rituals, and Materiality: Anxieties about a World Heritage Site.....	155
Conclusion .....	177

SIX CONCLUSION .....	178
----------------------	-----

APPENDICES

1. TABLE 1: TOOTH RELIC NARRATIVES COMPARED.....	186
2. TABLE 2: NARRATIVES OF AŚOKA’S 84,000 RELICS COMPARED.....	190

BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	195
--------------------	-----

## LIST OF IMAGES

Image 1.1:	View of Ordination Hall and principal <i>chedi</i> .....	3
Image 1.2:	Devotees participate in cloth-wrapping ceremony in main courtyard.....	4
Image 1.3:	Building housing replica Buddha footprint and small shrine entrance.....	8
Image 1.4:	Portion of gallery containing 173 Buddha statues.....	10
Image 1.5:	Practitioners venerate images in the <i>wihan thap kaset</i> beneath the principal <i>chedi</i> .....	11
Image 1.6:	Images in <i>wihan thap kaset</i> .....	11
Image 1.7:	Images in <i>wihan thap kaset</i> .....	11
Image 1.8:	Stairs lead to base of principal <i>chedi</i> in relic chamber.....	12
Image 1.9:	Devotee before main Buddha image in Chanting Hall.....	13
Image 2.1:	Hemachala and Thonthakuman in front of a junk ship.....	34
Image 2.2:	Close up showing Hemachala holding the relic casket.....	34
Image 3.1:	Used and bundled donative cloth on which devotees wrote wishes and blessings.....	69
Image 3.2:	Phra Kacchayana Shrine.....	71
Image 3.3:	Photos of infants in the <i>wihan phra kacchayana</i> .....	71
Image 3.4:	Relief in relic chamber depicts the future Buddha leaving the palace on horseback.....	85
Image 3.5:	Man ordains to fulfill pact in Ordination Hall.....	95
Image 4.1:	King Asoke monument in Nakhon city center.....	110
Image 4.2:	King Asoke of Nakhon/Buddha.....	122
Image 4.3:	Thonthakuman/Buddha.....	127
Image 4.4:	Hemachala/Buddha.....	130
Image 5.1:	Monks and novices lead lay devotees during cloth-wrapping ceremony.....	145
Image 5.2:	Main courtyard floods in front of two replica <i>stūpa</i> and scaffolding encompasses the principal <i>chedi</i> .....	159
Image 5.3:	Secondary <i>stūpa</i> wrapped in cloth.....	165
Image 6.1:	Devotees ritually bath Nakhon's Sihing Buddha image while celebrating the Thai New Year.....	181
Image 6.2:	Hemachala and Thonthakuman are shown clinging to a plank of wood after their ship capsizes.....	184

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1: Theravāda in the Intersection.....	41
--	----

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Tooth Relic Narratives Compared.....	186
Table 2: Narratives of Aśoka's 84,000 Relics Compared.....	190

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In February of this year, my PhD advisor and dissertation chair, Steve Collins, unexpectedly passed away. His loss is devastating for the fields of Buddhist and Pali Studies, and this dissertation is no exception. It no doubt suffers immensely from the absence of Steve's careful reading, encyclopedic knowledge of Buddhist and secondary texts, and his deep sense of humility that allowed him to entertain my ideas. I hope I have honored Steve's mentorship throughout this work, even though he was unable to read it in its completed form.

In light of this tragedy, Dan Arnold graciously stepped into the role of chair. Alireza Doostdar provided mentorship during my time at the University of Chicago and while writing. I thank both of them for their insights, as well as the time and energy they sacrificed on my account.

In 2001, I started my undergraduate work at Ohio University. A couple years later, I took a course, Introduction to Buddhism, my first foray into the study of these traditions. My professor was Justin McDaniel. Since that first course, and so for well over a decade now, Justin has been a steady source of encouragement, motivation, and inspiration. He is my intellectual beacon. But more than that, over the years, he has offered reassurance through rejection letters and graduate school struggles, and sent needed cheer in response to a litany of emails written through tears. There is no way to ever repay these uncountable acts of kindness, but I offer a small gesture of thanks here.

Of course, I need to thank each of my informants, who took time from their day to talk to a plucky foreigner. The staff and volunteers of Wat Phra That made me feel welcome and assisted whenever I requested. I greatly appreciate that during my first ethnographic trip,

Bunchar Pongpanich opened his family home, provided me with a place to stay, and offered access to his extensive personal library on all things Nakhon.

It is true that graduate school and scholarship in general can be a lonely endeavor. Spending time in libraries, pouring over dictionaries and grammars, wriggling oneself out of writer's block, reading dense scholarship, and researching abroad all have the amazing ability to isolate even while the end goal is a greater understanding of humanity, its history, and its potentials. That being said, this dissertation certainly could not have been completed alone. I thank each of my friends, colleagues, and teachers on various continents from my many years of academic and Thai language training for their insights and aid.

The Committee on Southern Asian Studies (COSAS) at the University of Chicago funded both fieldwork and portions of the writing this dissertation. I received an American Fellowship from AAUW (American Academy of University Women), which provided generous funding for the writing of the dissertation. The Empowering Network for International Thai Studies (ENITS), Institute of Thai Studies, Chulalongkorn University, with support from the Thailand Research Fund (TRF) also provided support for portions of the dissertation.

I am grateful that my family and best friends, who have supported me through this long endeavor and accepted my many absences from holidays and special events, get to see this dissertation come to completion knowing that I couldn't have done it without them. Next, I would be remiss if I failed to acknowledge my beloved companion, Ramble, who has been at my side every day for much of my doctoral program and throughout all of the writing of this dissertation. My canine soul mate, charming exercise companion, and all around magnificent beast makes each day infinitely better. Billy, a delightful little cat, passes his days napping nearby while I work. My little buddy's snuggles and cheer is always available when most

needed. Finally, there is very little chance I would have completed this without the unrelenting and unconditional support of Tim, my best friend, my boogie partner for life, and an unwavering source of comfort and safety (not to mention a willing and thorough editor). He prodded me when I needed to write and allowed me my indulgences when I needed to relax. Out of all those kinds of people, he's got a face with a view. This dissertation is dedicated to him.

## ABSTRACT

Located in Nakhon Si Thammarat on Thailand's upper southern peninsula, Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan (hereafter: Wat Phra That) is a bustling haven replete with a cornucopia of buildings, images, and objects, including, most famously, the relic of the Buddha's left eyetooth (*phra that khiao kaeo*). This dissertation processes the richness of Wat Phra That by examining the historiography, material culture, and contemporary debates that enliven the space and empower those who visit it. In the process, some underlying trends in Thai Buddhist textual traditions and contemporary practices are revealed.

The inspiration for this dissertation is the concept of networks, broadly conceived. I argue that various networks centered on Wat Phra That operate throughout time, space, and within and between communities. Thus, I look at translocal networks created through texts, a nodal network created through materials, and the interaction of global and local networks during the creation of a UNESCO World Heritage site. Throughout these overlapping networks, agency is enacted differently — by authors of local chronicles making global connections with other Buddhist communities, by both objects themselves and those who propitiate them, and through the contestation or celebration of certain processes of globalization which highlight how local, national, and international interests are vying for control of the space.

In Chapter Two, I discuss some of Nakhon's local, vernacular chronicles (*tamnan*). I focus on the portions that recount the tale of royal siblings Hemachala and Thonthakuman and their harrowing journey of protecting the Buddha's left eyetooth relic, as well as the legend of the retrieval of the 84,000 relics needed to fill King Aśoka of India's *stūpas*. To do so, I explore how local historiographies create links between Nakhon and the greater Buddhist world by utilizing and manipulating portions of the Pali *imaginaire*. In the process, a network is created in

which disparate geographic locales are united and the Buddhist community is expanded, an act which ultimately helps preserve the Buddhist *sāsana*.

In Chapter Three, I suggest the physical world of Wat Phra That functions as a nodal network. As such, the Buddha's tooth relic functions as a material nexus of immaterial potency that infuses nearby objects and people. Importantly, while the relic is enclosed in the principal *chedi*, and is indeed the epicenter of this potency, for practitioners, the relic is but one component in a complex space, and does not necessarily function as the focus of their devotion. Therefore, I also look to supplemental nodes of this potency and potentiality by moving outward from the relic in all directions toward the countless objects, images, and structures that fill the space. These nodes function as material access points to the immaterial potency of the space. In this nodal network, the nexus and nodes mutually reinforce each other, and an expansive network is created, sustained, and then utilized; not all components of this network contribute equally, but they all actively participate in and reinforce the nodal complex. Finally, I examine some of the ways practitioners utilize this network, including, for example, developing long-lasting, personal relationships with images in the hopes of having requests fulfilled.

Chapter Four focuses specifically on three images within the nodal network. Each lacks a clear identity, as the images are simultaneously the Buddha and local hero(ine)s of legend: Princess Hemachala, Prince Thonthakuman, and King Asoke of Nakhon. The images extend networks in time, space, narrative, and historiography as they are physical manifestations of the ongoing connection between the town's past, Buddhism, and the contemporary veneration of practitioners. They delightfully confuse and push boundaries in the Theravāda imagination of what it means to be a (the) Buddha, while also showing how narratives extend beyond texts and stories and into the concrete world of Buddhist practice. To this day, all three legendary figures

maintain a tutelary relationship with the town, its inhabitants, the monastery, and the Buddha relic. From the local chronicles to contemporary practice, they are warp and woof to the town's identity, and so too that of Wat Phra That.

Chapter Five explores a different type of ever-evolving network that includes international bodies and has affected the material culture of the monastery. In 2012, Thailand's Ministry of Natural Resources and Development submitted a proposal to have the monastery included on the country's Tentative List, the first major step to having the site designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This proposal fuels much of the gossip and conversation of those who pass their days at the monastery. Some are enthused about the possibility of global recognition, the chance to spread the teachings of the Buddha, and share Nakhon's history. However, the proposed designation has also created anxiety, conflict, and confusion within the community, particularly among those who feel they have been marginalized by the local and central governments that decided without their input to proceed with the proposal. These skeptical locals are concerned about the implications that the UNESCO designation, which comes with externally imposed stipulations and regulations, would have not only on their daily lives, but also on local customs and Buddhist rituals at the monastery. Moreover, the reshaping of Wat Phra That's objects landscape affords the opportunity to examine how material culture shapes and is shaped by not only contemporary Buddhist practice, but by the desires of some for a more globalized space.

## NOTES ON TRANSCRIPTION

For Thai, I follow the Royal Thai General System of Transcription, published by the Royal Institute of Thailand. This system eliminates diacritics for ease of reading for the general public. For Pali, I follow the Pali Text Society's system of transcription. Certain Pali terms and Thai names are so familiar to international readers that I leave these in their widely recognized form. So, for example, Buddha, Nakhon Si Thammarat, *sangha*, Pali, *dhamma*, *nibbana*, and Bangkok, are left without diacritics. When quoting another author, I follow their choice of transcription.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Located on Thailand's upper southern peninsula, Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan,<sup>1</sup> known locally and hereafter as Wat Phra That,<sup>2</sup> is a repository of history and culture. Affectionately and colloquially referred to in Southern Thai as “*muang khon*,” the city of Nakhon Si Thammarat<sup>3</sup> (hereafter: Nakhon) is home to this sprawling Buddhist monastic complex on the east coast of the Malay Peninsula. Wat Phra That is a bustling haven replete with a museum and large market, various halls for veneration, chanting and ordination, and a plethora of monuments and objects, including, most famously, the relic of the Buddha's left eyetooth<sup>4</sup> (*phra that khiao kaeo*)<sup>5</sup> within its principal *chedi* (Pali: *cetiya*).<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> In 1915, Prince Vajravudha visited and renamed the monastery from Wat Phra Boromathat to Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan, upgrading it to a first grade royal monastery. Wat Phra That was built as a *buddhavāsa* indicating that it was a public space, which housed Buddha images, *stūpas*, etc., but did not include living areas for monks. Eventually, it annexed multiple, nearby *sanghavāsa*, monastic quarters, and therefore now has monks' residences (Wat Phra That Museum, visited by the author). Thai monasteries are officially divided into two classes, royal and common. Royal monasteries (*phra aram luang*) are “founded or renovated by a King, Queen, Viceroy or Crown Prince, or founded or renovated by other people to be presented to the King.” Royal monasteries are further divided into three grades: “1<sup>st</sup> grade: very important monastery, where ashes of royal family may be kept, and which may receive highest honours [ . . . ] 2<sup>nd</sup> grade: important monastery, which may receive high honours. 3<sup>rd</sup> grade: locally important monastery. In each grade are four sub-categories: –*Rachaworamahawihan*, great monastery with large buildings, founded by King, Queen, Viceroy or Crown Prince to be dedicated to themselves. –*Rachaworawihan*, monastery founded by a King, Queen, Viceroy or Crown Prince to be dedicated to themselves. –*Woramahawihan*, great monastery with large buildings, founded by King, Queen, Viceroy or Crown Prince to be dedicated to someone else. –*Worawihan*, monastery founded by a King, Queen, Viceroy or Crown Prince to be dedicated to someone else” (Pichard 2003: 97). Pichard says there are only four 1<sup>st</sup> grade royal monasteries, all in Bangkok. However, Wat Phra That counts itself as one.

<sup>2</sup> Some other monasteries in Thailand also bear this colloquial name.

<sup>3</sup> The name of the town comes from the Pali “Nagara Śrī Dharmarāja,” or the “town of Dhammaraja” and stands for two concepts: “the Buddha as the Dhammaraja, the spiritually righteous king of the Buddhists and the Dhammaraja of King Asoka the Great [of Nakhon], the secularly righteous king” (*Tentative List*: 4).

<sup>4</sup> As will be discussed in the following chapters, there is some debate as to whether this relic is the real left eyetooth of the Buddha (i.e., Nakhon has the authentic relic others claim is housed in Kandy, Sri Lanka), half or some portion of that tooth, or a different relic of the Buddha entirely. As such, even though it is called the “crystal eyetooth relic,” not all those I interviewed knew this or thought, even with that name, it necessarily had to be a tooth.

<sup>5</sup> According to the *Dīgha Nikāya*, the twenty-sixth of thirty-two major signs of a one destined to become either a monarch or wheel-turning Buddha (i.e., a *chakravartin*) are “very lustrous” eyeteeth (Fickle 1998: 13). The peninsula on which Nakhon is situated (from Sankhla to Nakhon) is aptly referred to as the “Tooth Peninsula” on early maps (Wyatt 1975: 65).

The monastic grounds of Wat Phra That almost always teem with devotees, who come to perform quotidian Buddhist activities or participate in special rituals and celebrations. At any given time, there are around one hundred monks and approximately thirty novices residing there, *mae chi*<sup>7</sup> quarters house a few devout female practitioners, and lay practitioners often take up short-term residence on the premises. It is a place of social gathering for local devotees and non-believers alike, and host amulet making ceremonies, cultural events celebrating Southern Thai heritage, and an occasional spirit medium. Youth volunteers and adult caretakers work alongside merchants selling snacks, souvenirs, and lottery tickets near resting dogs lounging in the cool umbrage of *bodhi* trees. The monastery (*wat*) is also a destination for pilgrims who have travelled from afar for the opportunity to enter the relic shrine and pay homage before the great

---

<sup>6</sup> I will use *chedi* (Thai), *cetiya* (Pali), and *stūpa* (Sanskrit; Pali: *thūpa* (Pali) interchangeably throughout this dissertation. I have chosen to use the Sanskrit *stūpa* rather than the Thai *sathup*, as the former is likely more familiar to most readers and the latter is not in widespread use, even in Thailand. Technically, a relic is typically enshrined in a monument known as a *stūpa*, while the corporal relic is literally a *dhatū-cetiya*, and the reliquary containing it is a *chedi*. Thus, to be clear, Wat Phra That has a large, principal, bell-shaped *chedi* (a type of *stūpa*), built over the relic of the Buddha (and likely other relics) at its center, and numerous small *chedi/stūpa* surrounding it that contain ashes of the deceased.

The Pali word *cetiya* is derived from the Sanskrit root *ci*, meaning “to heap up,” or to “arrange in order.” According to Tambiah, “it also connotes *cit*, ‘to fix the mind upon something,’ ‘to remind,’ ‘to instruct,’ and in this sense is similar to the English word ‘monument’ (from the Latin *monere*, ‘to advise,’ i.e., to remind)” (Tambiah 1984: 201). Throughout Thailand there is a technical, four-fold classification of *cetiya*. Gabaude, utilizing quotations from Alexander Griswold (1973), describes them as follows: “1. ‘*Dhātu-cetiya*’ refers to ‘any object containing [corporeal] relics, such as teeth or fragments of bone left over after the Buddha’s cremation.’ In practice, it refers to a reliquary and by extension to the monument built upon the reliquary, i.e., the *stūpa*; 2. ‘*Paribhoka-cetiya*’ refers to ‘a ‘reminder by association,’ such as a *bodhi* tree [. . .], the sites of the Eight Great Events [. . .], the ‘Seven Stations’ where [the Buddha] spent the seven weeks following the Enlightenment, the seats he sat on, and the footprints he stamped’ throughout Asia; 3. ‘*Dhamma-cetiya*’ refers to ‘a ‘doctrinal reminder’ such as the Pali Canon, or a commentary on it, or an extract from the Canon inscribed on stone brick or metal’; 4. ‘*Uddesika-cetiya*’ refers to ‘an ‘indicative reminder,’ i.e., any object that the general opinion accepts as a suitable reminder of the Buddha’ (Gabaude 2003: 171).

<sup>7</sup> *Mae chi* are female Buddhist practitioners in Thailand, who dress in white robes and formally take eight vows (although, informally, *mae chi* often keep many more). Like monks, they shave their hair and eyebrows monthly and may give sermons, participate in Pali studies, meditate, and chant. They typically do not go on alms round, but can within certain communities. Most commonly these female ascetics live in designated quarters at monasteries, but there are also institutes and residencies exclusively for them. There are few fully ordained Buddhist nuns (*bhikkhuni*) in Thailand, and so *mae chi* serve as the primary ordained female population of the country.

reliquary.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, wandering around the expansive grounds and weaving throughout the many buildings and monuments, one's senses of sound, smell, and sight are often overwhelmed.



**Image 1.1:** View of Ordination Hall and principal *chedi* (photo by author)

This monastery is renowned throughout Thailand and beloved throughout the region; it is a source of great pride and is regularly described as the most important monastery in all of southern Thailand. Considered particularly auspicious, visitors to Wat Phra That often describe feelings of calmness, clarity, comfort, and happiness immediately manifest simply by entering the outer gates. As many told me, the monastery is the center of various family traditions, and generations of Nakhon residents have grown up on stories about the site and its import to the town. The significance of this familial connection to the monastery is reinforced in local traditions such as the cloth-wrapping ceremony (*hae pha khuen that*). As a further testament to this treasured familial heritage, the ashes of members of families that have long resided in the

---

<sup>8</sup> Nakhon lays claim to the same relic said to be famously enshrined in the Dalidāmaligawa (i.e. the Temple of the Tooth) in Kandy, a perennial object of veneration and political intrigue within both Sri Lanka and the Buddhist world beyond. For centuries, an accompanying tale of husband and wife fleeing India with the relic of the Buddha's tooth and destined for the nearby island has been a fixture in the narrative imaginations of Sri Lankan Buddhists.

town are interred in the smaller *stūpas* that fill the inner courtyard and in some of the images in the Buddha gallery.



**Image 1.2:** Devotees participate in cloth-wrapping ceremony in main courtyard (photo by author)

Adding to Wat Phra That's national notoriety, between 2006 and 2007, a multi-billion dollar industry was generated through the phenomenon of its Chatukham-Rammathep amulets, which featured the town and monastery's spirit guardians. Still sold today, although with admittedly less fanfare, the amulets are particularly popular among business people and are thought to bring power, wealth, health, and other success to their possessors. Throughout Buddhist history there have always been marketplaces as kings built *stūpas* and monasteries replete with powerful images; ordinary people gave food and shelter to monks in exchange for *dhamma*, merit, or even enlightenment, and cities were sustained through the acquisition of relics. While such economies of merit, apotropaism, and power may have transformed, the creative impulse of Buddhists to secure real-world felicities through potent objects has sustained itself through time. Wat Phra That is no exception; a relic of the Buddha and the diverse objects that flank it in all directions continue to attract visitors, garner international attention, and encourage disparate acts of propitiation throughout this monastery.

This dissertation processes the richness of Wat Phra That by examining the historiography, material culture, and contemporary debates that enliven the space and empower those who visit it. In the process, some underlying trends in Thai Buddhist textual traditions and contemporary practices will be revealed. To do this, I argue that various networks centered on Wat Phra That operate throughout time, space, and within and between communities. Throughout these overlapping networks, agency is enacted differently — by authors of local chronicles making global connections with other Buddhist communities, by both objects themselves and those who propitiate them, and through the contestation or celebration of certain processes of globalization that highlight how local, national, and international interests are vying for control of the space.

Following Bruno Latour, who writes about using the concept of networks primarily as a mode of inquiry into social relations, I understand networks as ever-changing, expansive across space and time, and comprised of many actors, including things, people, animals, technologies, and whatever else may be engaged.<sup>9</sup> Latour's networks are not a fixed series of connected points (e.g., like a network of highways), but rather are *interactions* among actors that perpetually transform one another through their encounters with each other. Using the concept of networks, we are able to see that there are no “self-contained” actors (i.e., people, objects, etc.) but rather only that which exists as a complex of diverse relations. Alfred Gell proposes something similar when he writes, “a person and a person’s mind are not confined to particular spatio-temporal coordinates, but consist of a spread of biographical events and memories of events, and a dispersed category of material objects, traces, and leavings, which can be attributed to a person” that cumulatively come to demonstrate instances of agency during one’s lifetime, and which can

---

<sup>9</sup> In Latour’s language, these are “actor-networks.”

thus prolong one's "biological career" after death.<sup>10</sup> In this instance, Gell is specifically discussing people, and we will see, for example, how the Buddha's life has indeed been extended well beyond his death and into the contemporary world through the transmission of his corporeal relics. Similarly, Latour argues that actors themselves are complex networks of relations and so according to Latour, "Strictly speaking, it is not true that there are interactions between individuals. Individual action is much too distributed to be defined in terms of interaction."<sup>11</sup> Conceptually conceived thusly, networks allow for and are comprised of the radical redistribution of action by any agent. While processes of interaction always have the potential to cause change in unexpected ways, it is also the case that through repeated interactions and relationships a network is sustained. Since this is the case, it is not true that whole systems are more complex than the parts that comprise it. Rather, "phenomenon can be said to be collective without being superior to individuals."<sup>12</sup> Understanding networks in this way, allows us to take seriously both the individual agents (e.g., a particular object or a single practitioner), while also recognizing their inherent connectedness to various networks.

Thus, throughout this dissertation, I argue that people are in a constant relationship with their surroundings, maintaining overlapping and diverging networks with other people, objects, the many texts or stories that have shaped their lives, and the practices in which they engage. These networks can be between families, others in the community, those with more or less social or political power, etc. That is, these networks are formed horizontally and vertically, cutting across various segments of society and one's social interactions. People cultivate virtues and participate in material culture for a myriad of reasons, some of which are communal, others

---

<sup>10</sup> Gell 1998: 222

<sup>11</sup> Latour 2010: 5-7

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*: 9-14

personal. Indeed, the complexity of people likely leads to them believing or engaging in seemingly contradictory practices. In any case, it is these through these various networks where they construct, negotiate and come to define meanings. This is likely the way it always has been, manifesting in innumerable ways. These networks extend greatly when we begin to include the materiality that is so fundamental to the workings of a Buddhist monastery and the practices of Buddhists.

For our purposes and as will be shown in Chapter Two, we find networks within and between texts, and among unknown authors on multiple continents writing in different times. Chapter Three highlights how objects are connected to each other, those who have and continue to utilize them, and the texts and stories about them. For example, sustained relationships between devotee and object are the basis for real-world felicities and assistance. In Chapter Four, we are presented with material incarnations of Buddhahood bestowed to local heroes by the creators and propitiators of images. Taking seriously the fluid nature and agency of objects, dependent as it is on different networks and interactions, these images can be viewed as both local heroes and the Buddha himself. Importantly, these images can also function variously according to their perceived identity. Even Hemachala, a female heroine can be the Buddha. (The distributed person of the Buddha has indeed been brought to the fore!) Finally, in Chapter Five, we see how a seemingly amorphous network, a proposed UNESCO World Heritage site, is being encountered, challenged, and celebrated. To be sure, as scholars and readers, we have plunged ourselves headlong into these very networks.

## The Layout of Wat Phra That

In the following chapters, many more details about the objects and settings of Wat Phra That will be revealed. Thus, for now, I will explain the layout of the monastery as I provide brief descriptions. Stretching from north to south, Wat Phra That sits on around thirteen acres of land approximately a mile and a half south of the Nakhon city center. At the north end of the complex are monk and *mae chi* quarters and the main parking lot. There is also a small garden and a building where classes, meetings, and other activities can be held. From the parking lot, one enters the main courtyard, which can also be accessed from the street through the north gate. There is an office for volunteers and a small shop for amulets and images on one's left, and a short mound to the right, ascended via a curving staircase. At the knoll's base is a shrine, with an entrance adorned with concrete protuberances that give the impression one is entering a cave; inside is an image the Buddha, flanked by miniature replications of the Wandering Ascetic. Customary holders for offerings of incense, flowers, candles, and robes are on or near the marble floor. To one side of the base of the meager hill is a Chinese-style Buddha.



**Image 1.3:** Building housing replica Buddha footprint and small shrine entrance (photo by author)

On the other side is a small covered shrine for Mae Thorani, who appears as a relief on a golden stone. When I last saw her, two Barbie-style dolls in traditional Thai dress were by her side. Atop the meager hill is the building housing a stone replica of the Buddha's footprint (*phra phutthabat jamlong*), engraved with the customary one hundred and eight images onto which devotees have placed coins and golden fleck. From here, looking out over the expanse of the monastery, the forest green, burnt orange, and deep maroon roof tiles pervading the space remind one of the scales borne by protective *nāga* (Thai: *nak*).<sup>13</sup> On the left hand side of the courtyard, lined with a short enclosing wall, are two Bodhi trees, an Indian Sala tree, picnic tables, tiled benches, a stand to purchase donative offerings, and the monastery manager's quarters with more amulets and other accouterment available. Two relatively small *stūpas*, each with inset Buddha images on each of their four sides, are near the gate providing entrance to the inner courtyard. These are purportedly earlier, Śrīvijaya-style iterations of the central *chedi* as it took its current form in the bell-shaped style of Sri Lanka.

Near the inner courtyard gate are more stands where one can acquire various items (e.g., amulets and books about Wat Phra That) or exchange one *baht* for 100 *satang* to place in the nearby small, black, metal offering bowls. At the center of the inner courtyard is the principal *chedi* (*phra borommathat chedi*),<sup>14</sup> which according to legends in both Thai and Khmer has its top portion covered in over three hundred and thirteen pounds of gold. At its peak is an ornament (*phum khao bin*), similar in shape to an upside spade, made from gold, and embellished with jewels and marbles. Spanning the length of each of the four walls of this courtyard is a gallery of

---

<sup>13</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I will use the Pali *nāga* rather than the Thai *nak*, as the former is likely more familiar to most readers.

<sup>14</sup> According to the UNESCO World Heritage Site application, there have been ten major *stupa* reconstructions or restoration: in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, 1612-1616, 1647, 1732-1758, 1769, 1895-1898, 1914, 1972-1974, 1987, and 1994-1995 (*Tentative List*: 4-5).

one hundred and seventy-three evenly spaced, sitting Buddha images (*phra dan* or *wihan khod*).<sup>15</sup>



**Image 1.4:** Portion of gallery containing 173 Buddha statues (photo by author)

Filling out the entire courtyard are the one hundred and fifty-eight secondary *stūpa*, including one with an opening in which a large, golden Buddha (*phra panya*) resides. Additionally, there are also buildings dedicated to King Asoke of Nakhon (*wihan sam chom*)<sup>16</sup> and Phra Kacchayana<sup>17</sup> (*wihan phra kacchayana*), as well as the entrance to the square, lower base of the principal *chedi* (*wihan thap kaset*). This portion of the base is comprised of four sides of equal length and can be entered from two doorways. The second level is a couple steps higher than the first, and is most frequently utilized by those wrapping it in yellow donative cloth or applying gold fleck to one of the twenty-two concrete elephant heads emerging from each arch supporting the base.

<sup>15</sup> The images are from the late Ayutthaya to Rattanakosin periods, and most contain ashes of locals from Nakhon.

<sup>16</sup> A *wihan* is an assembly hall or shrine. There are several at Wat Phra That.

<sup>17</sup> The seated image is just less than six feet high and resides on a base of just over six feet. For more on images of Phra Kacchayana as they are situated within a Thai monastery see Lagirarde (2003). For the most comprehensive analysis of the image available see Lagirarde (2001). Phra Kacchayana is a disciple of the Buddha, immediately identified by his protruding belly, which often prohibits his hands from resting in his lap, and his “rather unsightly facial traits.” He has a large, flat head and elongated ears. These images are also found in the Shan states of Burma, Laos, and Cambodia. Kacchayana has been granted an elevated status compared to other disciples; he is often seated higher than other images and can be installed in special *vihara* (also called *sala kuti*) dedicated specifically to him (as is done at Wat Phra That) (ibid.: 150). Locally, this image is also called “Phra Aet.” The meaning of this name is a bit ambiguous, however. According to the *Encyclopedia of Southern Thailand*, the name comes from the phrase *nang aet*, which is used to describe one sitting in *samādhi* meditation with a relaxed or slouched back. The name could also come from the Sanskrit or Pali root *edh*, found in the Pali verb *edhati*, for example, which means, “to gain or succeed.” The first explanation comes from the deformity of the monk’s body, and the second alludes to his ability to bring prosperity (Lagirarde 2003: 159-160).



**Image 1.5:** Practitioners venerate images in the *wihan thap kaset* beneath the principal *chedi* (photo by author)

Most visitors spend their time on the first level, making offerings, meditating, ringing bells and gongs, receiving blessings from a monk, or just generally taking in the cornucopia of images of the Buddha and other monks and various objects. According to the monastery's brochure, there are officially ninety-two Buddha images in standing or sitting position, most which were constructed during the later part of the Ayutthaya or early Rattanakosin periods (i.e., approximately the 18<sup>th</sup> century).



**Images 1.6 and 1.7:** Images in *wihan thap kaset* (left and right) (photos by author)

Additionally, there are many other newer, smaller images. For example, the ubiquitous eight Buddha figures representing each day of the week (including one each for Wednesday morning

and evening), and one hundred and eight identical, small, standing Buddha figures arranged in one corner in two neat rows. Each has their own wooden collection box, so devotees can deposit a *satang* (1/100<sup>th</sup> of a baht) into each of the receptacles. Interestingly, there are three ornate preaching chairs, one in the middle of each of three halls. In the past, the most talented orators used these to give sermons; the most highly skilled sat in the chair facing east, the second ranked monk on that facing south, and the third most capable preacher used the chair facing west. Less skilled preachers had to utilize the courtyard until promoted to the westward facing chair.



**Image 1.8:** Stairs lead to base of principal *chedi* in relic chamber (photo by author)

The entrance to the ornate relic chamber (*wihan phra song ma* or *wihan phra ma*) is in line with gate entrance to the inner courtyard. The floor space for use by devotees is narrow, only allowing for a couple rows of people at a time. When open, climbing the chamber stairs and passing golden images of Chatukham and Ramathep at their top, allows one to partially ascend

the *chedi* and circumambulate its elevated base (*lan pra taksin*). The room is elaborately decorated with a red ceiling and pillars embellished with gold, and brightly colored sculptures of various mythical creatures and *nāga* on each side of the staircase. The outer walls supporting the staircase are decorated with golden-colored stucco reliefs set on a red background, and depict Prince Siddhartha as he left his palace on horseback, accompanied by various deities and embarking on his ascetic quest. The largest Buddha image is standing against the back wall.



**Image 1.9:** Devotee before main Buddha image in Chanting Hall (photo by author)

Moving back to the main courtyard, one can enter the eastward facing Chanting Hall (*wihan dhamma sala*). Before being enclosed, this building was an open-air pavilion (*sala*), and so it was possible from inside the *sala* to see the principal *chedi* with which it is directly in line. An engraving indicates the building was renovated in 1894 A.D., when a pagoda was added to intern a bone relic of Phra Yaramratchathainam, a former ruler of Nakhon who is said, according

to an inscription in Chinese, to have died in a battle in 1638 A.D.<sup>18</sup> The images of Hemachala and Thonthakuman that will be discussed in Chapter Four are located here. This building contains many images of the Buddha and others, as well as lifelike replicas of famous monks from the monastery and province enclosed in glass boxes.

Just south of the Chanting Hall is an area devoted to an image of King Thaksin (*phra borom rup phra chao dak*), which also includes small Chinese-style *stūpa*. There's a stand nearby to purchase donative offerings for the famed king. Nearby, outside the inner courtyard wall, but to the south of the central *chedi* is the large *uposatha* (*uposot*, *bosot*, or *bot* in Thai) or Ordination Hall (*phra wihan luang*), consecrated by the installment by boundary stones (*bai sema*) around its periphery. Said to have been built in 1628, it features the inward leaning exterior columns and protruding gables characteristic of early Ayutthaya-style architecture. Like the Chanting Hall, its front faces east, the direction of the rising sun.<sup>19</sup> Beyond the Ordination Hall, further south is a back courtyard shaded by the umbrage of the surrounding trees. There one finds a raised platform that displays the images of Hemachala and Thonthakuman standing in front of their junk ship holding the relic casket, the legendary Lady White Blood and King Asoke of Nakhon sitting side by side, and an image of a King Taksin as a monk. Each image resides under a multi-tiered golden umbrella. In this back area are also stands for having one's palm read or receiving fortunes, and a raised bell. There are also several images of the Buddha, various sculptures, including one of a Brahman, and a scene from the first sermon where Gotama is

---

<sup>18</sup> Wat Phra That Brochure in Thai

<sup>19</sup> The hall was restored between 1811 and 1839. Others provide a less specific date to the building's original constructions, noting it was likely built between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

instructing five disciples.<sup>20</sup> These images are rather dilapidated. Nonetheless, they are enjoyed by locals who pass much of their day there, and by the monastic dogs that appreciate the shade offered by the various pavilions. There are also additional quarters for short or long-term guests (*kuti*) in this back area.

At the far end of the complex, beyond the southern gate, is the expansive market where various stalls sell clothing, jewelry, herbs and traditional remedies, images of Buddhas and wide range of other figures, CDs with *dhamma* lessons and chanting, amulets, snacks, toys and trinkets, and other souvenirs, like shadow puppets. Mobile merchants move throughout much of the outer courtyard grounds.

Additionally, there is an on-site monastic museum that spans two separate buildings and is comprised of three primary sections. The first (*wihan phra khian*<sup>21</sup>), accessed near the entrance to the relic chamber, displays many of the gifts that have been donated to the museum. These gifts include all varieties of accessories including rings, necklaces, hairpins, belts, etc., silver and golden decorative trees, Buddha images of all sizes, and much more. Outside this area is the entrance to the small, elevated courtyard that contains a Bodhi tree, grown from a sapling from Sri Lanka thought to have come directly from Bodh Gaya. This area is typically locked and therefore infrequently visited. The second section of the museum (*wihan bo lanka*) continues out from the gift area and houses a large variety of Buddha images. An approximately thirty-nine foot, 18<sup>th</sup> century reclining Buddha is on the west side of the gallery, and the north side features display cases replete with Buddha images from various regions and time periods. Standing

---

<sup>20</sup> Images of disciples are common throughout Thai monasteries. The disciples are always depicted identically, and come in groups of two, five, eight, and eighty. For example, in the Ordination Hall (*bot*) at Wat Suthat in Bangkok, eighty, human-size sculptures depict disciples of the Buddha.

<sup>21</sup> In Thai, “*khian*” means to write or draw and so the name of the building references the murals that used to appear on the walls and pillars of the building. The damaged murals have since been covered with new paint.

Buddha images too large for encasement line this wall. Displayed are other gifts to the monastery, like replica relic caskets and trees made from fine metals, as well as furniture and local artifacts of a famed governor (*chao muang*) of the province, stones bearing inscriptions, and other local artifacts, like betel trays, an alms bowl, different types of amulets, and clothes. The final section of the museum, entered from the north side of the inner courtyard or from near the base of the knoll supporting the replica of the Buddha's footprint, houses old artifacts, weapons, wares, and porcelain, for example, but also some other, more obscure artifacts related to Nakhon's connection to the sea, including an old whale skeleton, preserved sea turtles shells, as well as sea shells. The museums do not serve only didactic purposes (although the placards and informational boards do that), but also serve as a hub between these donative goods and the rest of the nodal network that will be discussed in Chapter Three. Additionally, by showcasing imported wares, the museum reinforces the monasteries connections to global networks.

The monastery as it is today was built over time. According to legend, the first "pagoda" was built on the town's beach by Hemachala and Thonthakuman in 311 CE, long before the rest of the monastery's building were constructed between the early 12<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. According to one source, the first construction of the principal *stūpa*, surrounding *cetiyas*, and open-air north *vihara* (currently part of the monastic museum) was in 1176.<sup>22</sup> By 1376, a shrine for the Bodhi tree sapling, an open-air preaching hall and a roof surrounding the principal *chedi* were constructed. Then in 1493, the Chanting Hall was renovated and walls were constructed around the existing structures (i.e., this wall currently surrounds the inner courtyard). Then, between 1492 and 1627, the elaborate relic chamber was built. In 1628, the beginnings of the Ordination Hall, a small building with a square roof, were added. Then, between 1818 and 1839

---

<sup>22</sup> The *Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* claims that Wat Phra That was founded in 757 AD as a Śrīvijaya Mahāyāna Buddhist monastery. I am not sure from where this date was derived.

the Ordination Hall as it is today, replaced the previous building. Since 1909, the wall for main courtyard separating the monastery from main road, the building for the Buddha's footprint, more small *stūpas*, and other the small buildings (*vihara*) holding the images of Phra Kacchayana and King Asoke have been built.<sup>23</sup> In any case, since approximately the early 13<sup>th</sup> to mid-14<sup>th</sup> centuries, located in what may have been the capital of Tambralinga, Wat Phra That has been the principal monastery for the region.

## Early Background

Empirical evidence, including inscriptional records,<sup>24</sup> regarding the early religious history of Nakhon is sparse.<sup>25</sup> What is clear, however, is the region has been developing expansive global networks for many centuries, with materials and ideas arriving to and travelling from the region, particularly with the many merchants utilizing its ports. In fact, archeological evidence from southern Thailand suggests sustained, well-organized maritime trade networks between South and Southeast Asia, including southern Thailand, as early as the third century BCE and continuing through the third century CE, with a high point of trade occurring, perhaps between

---

<sup>23</sup> Kirdsiri (no date or page numbers provided)

<sup>24</sup> As a whole, the South retains far fewer epigraphical inscriptions than the rest of Thailand. Also, it is neglected in the court chronicles of Ayutthaya and Bangkok, which resulted in not only a lack of additional sources, but also relative lack of sustained scholastic interest in the area (Wyatt 1975: 2-3).

<sup>25</sup> I am beginning this historical sketch from the so-called "Historical Period." This should not be taken as an implicit suggestion that this is when meaningful activity actually begins in the area. Archeological evidence from the prehistoric period makes it clear that this area has been inhabited since at least 6500-4200 years ago as fragments of earthenware pots, stone tools, and beads have been discovered from the Mesolithic period (Chandavij and Traikasem 2000: 19). Before the beginning of the Christian era, it is likely the people of the area practiced rice cultivation, using buffalo and ox, and had contact with others through trade. These early communities continued to develop and interact with others and their ideas. Scholarship on the south of Thailand has tended to examine Nakhon Si Thammarat primarily in relation the arrival of the Tai peoples, and "their relations with the powers they met during their expansion, chiefly the Mon state(s) called Dvaravati and the Khmers of Cambodia, and the establishment of the great Siamese capitals of Sukhothai, Ayutthaya and Bangkok." The "early history" of Nakhon Si Thammarat then is the period before the late 1200's, including the region's involvement with the aforementioned kingdoms. There is quite a bit of scholarship in Thai by southern Thai scholars on this early period, and while some, "is all too often merely summarized," the interest by Thai scholars and others continues to grow (Munro-Hay 2001: xv). For example, there have been recent conferences focusing on the early history of Southern Thailand and new archeological digs. See Munro-Hay 2001: 7-77 for a summary of the period prior to the 1300 A.D.

100 BCE and 100 CE.<sup>26</sup> Functioning as an independently rule port town since the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the kingdom of Tambralinga<sup>27</sup> seems to have spanned much of the eastern coast of the peninsula including what is currently the coast of Nakhon Si Thammarat province. An inscription from 1230 by Chandrabanu records that Tambralinga was expansive, powerful, and engaged with other international states. It is possible that modern day Nakhon was the capital of the kingdom, but this is uncertain. Chinese records further attest that as a vibrant port city Tambralinga traded both east and west, including in exports like tin, which were particularly lucrative.<sup>28</sup> Politically, the kingdom seems to have had involvement with Angkor, the polity called Funan by the Chinese, the islands to the south, as well as with Śrīvijaya. The kingdom also had various connections with China, Sri Lanka, and India, as evidenced by ancient wares, Chinese porcelain and pottery, statuary, metalwork, jewelry, seals, and more found in the region. Later, the Portuguese, Dutch, British, and French would use the commercial port. Beginning in the 8<sup>th</sup> and continuing through the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century, Tambralinga functioned as a major site during the Śrīvijaya empire; the region contended for the Angkorian throne in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, and was perhaps the source of two invasions of Ceylon during the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century. It is impossible to precisely date when Tambralinga submitted to the Thai rulers of the north, but even after doing so, it remained a powerful center in the south controlling Siamese interests on the peninsula and received tributes from many Malay rulers. Eventually, perhaps around the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the kingdom was brought under the rule of Ayutthaya, but it seems as if the area retained quite a bit of autonomy from the northern ruling states as the principality remained both an important port

---

<sup>26</sup> Jahan cites evidence of a reoccurring coastal trade route between Sri Lanka, South India, Orissa, Bengal, and Southeast Asia (i.e., what is now Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Indonesia). Jahan 2013: 17.

<sup>27</sup> The name “Tambralinga” appears in an inscription from 1230 A.D. written in Sanskrit with Khmer script found at Wat Hua Wiang in Surat Thani province.

<sup>28</sup> Munro-Hay 2001: 2-3

and vital in the maintenance of relations with Malay states. Various uprisings occurred in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but the town remained under Ayutthaya's control. After the Burmese sacking of Ayutthaya in 1767, Nakhon again attempted to declare independence, but was subdued by one of King Taskin of Thonburi's armies. Afterwards, while only holding a vassal kingship, the ruler still governed cities in the South. During the Rattanakosin and Bangkok periods, Rama I demoted the town's status again, to first class provincial city (*huamong chun ek*). During Rama III's reign, Nakhon Si Thammarat gained back a bit more governing authority throughout the South. In 1882, during Rama V's reign, Nakhon Si Thammarat became a city in the "Nakhon Si Thammarat circle (*monthon*).” Then, in 1933, after the change in ruling system during the reign of Rama VII, Nakhon became a provincial city in the Royal Thai Kingdom.

Alongside archeological evidence of ancient settlements, three inscriptions in Pallava script from the 7<sup>th</sup> century, including one from Wat Phra That, evince Nakhon Si Thammarat province's ties to India and the sects of Śiva and Viśnu.<sup>29</sup> A shrine to Vishnu in Nakhon city, and Vishnu statues and material evidence of Śiva worship, including *linga*, have been found at various archeological sites throughout the province,<sup>30</sup> the earliest dates to perhaps as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE and ample material evidence exists from around the 5<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>31</sup> In addition to the continuing presence of materials attesting to the worship of Śiva and Viśnu, other material evidence from the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, including stone bases and pillars, attests to the

---

<sup>29</sup> The other two inscriptions from the province are from Hup Khao Chong Khoi and Wat Maheyong. Both are in Sanskrit using Pallava script and date to around the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The Wat Phra That inscription is written in Mon using Pallava script and also dates from around the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>30</sup> There are more than forty Hindu shrines dating between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries in Nakhon Si Thammarat province.

<sup>31</sup> Some of these items including *linga* and their bases, images of Śiva, Viśnu, and Harihara, for are on display at the National Museum in Nakhon. An image of Viśnu from around the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century, found at the Ho Phra Narai (Viśnu shrine) in Nakhon city, is considered one of the earliest Hindu images found in Thailand (National Museum in Nakhon).

continuing utilization of South Indian motifs.<sup>32</sup> Chinese documents confirm both Buddhism and Brahmanism in the region prior to the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>33</sup> A stone head of a Buddha image dating to 5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century has been found in the Sichon district of Nakhon Si Thammarat province.<sup>34</sup> The connections to the Śrīvijaya empire, which built temples and images dedicated to Bodhisattvas, seems to have fostered Mahayana Buddhism, which appears to have flourished on the peninsula between the mid-8<sup>th</sup> to the late-13<sup>th</sup> centuries. For example, an image of Avalokitesvara in Srivijaya style from around the 9<sup>th</sup> century has been found in Nakhon. Then, during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, the region and town served as a key site for the transmission of Theravāda Buddhism from Ceylon to the rest of Siam and Cambodia.<sup>35</sup> It seems clear that Nakhon, and so Wat Phra That, was a “focal point in the relationship between the Sri Lankan Mahāvihāra school and the Siamese Sangha.”<sup>36</sup> With the arrival of Europeans, Nakhon is mentioned under its Malay name, Ligor, as a commerce center. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the port town is a hub of relations between the Siamese and British in Penang and Malaya.<sup>37</sup>

## Approaches and Methods

Over the course of the past fourteen years, I have spent nearly three years in Thailand. I have volunteered in the north, ordained as a *mae chi* in central Thailand, worked and researched

---

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Found in the province, there are a large number of images indicating Hindu worship (e.g., Ganesha, Hamsa (swan), Viṣṇu and Śiva statues) from the 13<sup>th</sup> through the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

<sup>34</sup> National Museum in Nakhon; Pichard cites the earliest archeological evidence of Buddhism in Thailand as coming from the southern region and dating between the 5-6<sup>th</sup> centuries (Pichard 2003: 94).

<sup>35</sup> The evidence of various sects and religious practitioners in the region is presented here quite linearly in order to provide a basic outline of the region’s religious developments. This should not be taken to mean that religious traditions are always so neatly dissected into various sects, that at any one time only a single tradition was present, or that earlier traditions did not continue to impact those that came later. The reality, rather than a linear trajectory, was likely more of a back and forth characterized by deep interactions, a borrowing and loaning, where a confluence of ideas being utilized by devotees continued to shaped one another.

<sup>36</sup> Pichard 2003: 93

<sup>37</sup> Munro-Hay 2001: xiv.

in Bangkok, and conducted my dissertation research in the South. While this dissertation is about a single monastery in Nakhon, my time in the various regions of Thailand has greatly informed my understandings about the material culture and religious practices of a Buddhist monastery. I collected data for this dissertation through interviews and participant observation, and then preserved it in field notes, photographs, and audio and video recordings. I located secondary sources by utilizing the National Museum of Nakhon Si Thammarat's library, the Nakhon city library, and the library at Nakhon Si Thammarat Rajabhat University.

During the summer of 2013, I began dissertation fieldwork and interviewed informants over the course of approximately four weeks in Nakhon. I conducted additional fieldwork in Nakhon for approximately seven weeks in the spring of 2016. Cumulatively, I conducted over fifty semi-structured interviews with informants ranging in age from eighteen to the elderly. They ranged in length from the relatively brief to over four hours. I passed many of my days in Nakhon in the outer courtyard of Wat Phra That, sitting in the shade and engaging those doing the same. Speaking with guests as they relaxed on the provided benches, I was guided in large part by questions I had prepared in advance. I tried to collect some demographic information, and when the informant permitted, I recorded the conversation. In any case, the interviews were not rigidly structured. During both these research trips, I also spoke with many others at the monastery and around town, including volunteers at the *wat*, local artists, merchants, visitors, and others from Nakhon and elsewhere. Some of these people I saw regularly at the monastery or other places I frequented in town. These conversations were never recorded, but the perspectives shared during these exchanges certainly undergird my conclusions. More importantly, these friendly faces (and often the tasty sustenance they provided) enriched my experience in Nakhon while lessening the pangs of loneliness an ethnographer often encounters.

As a dynamic space that encourages disparate activities, Wat Phra That attracts a wide variety of patrons. I found there to be four primary types of visitors to Wat Phra That. My informants are mostly members in the first two groups. As such, my research primarily presents the views of locals or out of town visitors who came to the monastery independently, rather than the perspectives of those who came as part of a tour group or as international tourists.

The first group consists of residents of Nakhon or those who live nearby in the province. For many locals, visiting the monastery is part of their everyday life and one way they stay involved in their community. In this group too are the many mobile merchants on the grounds, the staff of the monastery, and the stationary vendors in the nearby market. In the second group are those from farther provinces, who independently come to Wat Phra That to see the famous monastery and venerate its relic. For example, I met one couple that had spent many hours travelling north on their scooter from Songkhla province. As will be discussed at length in Chapter Three, others also come from farther away in Thailand or Malaysia to ordain at Wat Phra That or enter into pacts there. The third group is those visiting the monastery as part of a group tour. They arrive on large, commercial buses and unlike many independent visitors, touring Wat Phra That is only a small part of their trip. I found it quite difficult to speak with these types of visitors, since they are kept busy on their guided tours and then head on to their next destination, perhaps a waterfall, another monastery, or a nearby restaurant. On an ordinary, non-holiday day there could be as many as six or seven large tour buses parked on the main street in front of Wat Phra That. More often than not, at least one tour bus stopped at the monastery on any given day. The fourth type of visitor is the international tourist. I did not interview any international tourists as part of this research.

My approach has been interdisciplinary and includes the insights of scholars of texts, religion, Buddhism, anthropology, art history, history, and Heritage Studies. While I hope my choices bring to life much of what makes Wat Phra That special, this dissertation is not meant to be a comprehensive historical analysis, a catalog of all objects and materials, or a litany of rituals and celebrations that take place in and around Wat Phra That.<sup>38</sup> Practitioners draw on various aspects of their traditions at different times for a whole multitude of reasons; there is no reason to assume when compiled these will form a single, cohesive narrative. Rather, the deeper we delve into the beliefs of those we talk with, the more likely we are to find seemingly contradictory statements or practices. The person as a network is indeed complex and I have tried my best to convey the density that is inherent in the fabric of being human (and material).

### **Summary of Chapters**

In Chapter Two, I discuss some of Nakhon's local, vernacular chronicles (*tamnan*). I focus on the portions that recount the tale of royal siblings Hemachala and Thonthakuman and their harrowing journey of protecting the Buddha's left eyetooth relic, as well as the legend of the retrieval of the 84,000 relics needed to fill King Aśoka of India's *stūpas*. To do so, I explore how local historiographies create links between Nakhon and the greater Buddhist world by utilizing and manipulating portions of the Pali *imaginaire*. In the process, a network is created in which disparate geographic locales are united and the Buddhist community is expanded, an act which ultimately helps preserve the Buddhist *sāsana*.

---

<sup>38</sup> Unlike other studies on single monasteries in Thailand, I will not be providing rich ethnographic descriptions of all the primary and/or secondary rituals at Wat Phra That and in Nakhon, or the life cycle and consecration rituals of Buddhists (and others) throughout the town. For this type of study on a central Thai monastery see: Terweil (1975). For another classic study on a single monastery in Northern Thailand and its functioning as a religious, educational, and administrative center, see Swearer (1976). My intention is to provide a new way of thinking about the functioning of a Buddhist monastery and the ways people utilize it, rather than a comprehensive listing of the events, activities, and bureaucratic workings of the place.

For Chapter Three, we leave the textual tradition and enter the contemporary and physical world of Wat Phra That, which I suggest functions as a nodal network. The Buddha relic functions as a material nexus of immaterial potency that infuses nearby objects and people. Importantly, while the relic is enclosed in the principal *chedi*, and is indeed the epicenter of this potency, for practitioners, the relic is but one component in a complex space, and does not necessarily function as the focus of their devotion. Therefore, I also look to supplemental nodes of this potency and potentiality by moving outward from the relic in all directions toward the countless objects, images, and structures that fill the space. These nodes function as material access points to the immaterial potency of the space. In this nodal network, the nexus and nodes mutually reinforce each other, and an expansive network is created, sustained, and then utilized; not all components of this network contribute equally, but they all actively participate in and reinforce the nodal complex. Finally, I examine some of the ways practitioners utilize this network, including, for example, developing long-lasting, personal relationships with images in the hopes of having requests fulfilled.

In Chapter Four, I focus on three images within the nodal network. Each lacks a clear identity, as the images are simultaneously Buddhas and local hero(ine)s of legend: Princess Hemachala, Prince Thonthakuman, and King Asoke of Nakhon. I explore some of the possible implications of the dual identities of these images. The images extend networks in time, space, narrative, and historiography as they are physical manifestations of the ongoing connection between the town's past, Buddhism, and the contemporary veneration of practitioners. They delightfully confuse and push boundaries in the Theravāda imagination of what it means to be a (the) Buddha, while also showing how narratives extend beyond texts and stories and into the concrete world of Buddhist practice. To this day, all three legendary figures maintain a tutelary

relationship with the town, its inhabitants, the monastery, and the Buddha relic. From the local chronicles to contemporary practice, they are warp and woof to the town's identity, and so too that of Wat Phra That.

Chapter Five explores a different type of ever-evolving network that includes international bodies and has affected the material culture of the monastery. In 2012, Thailand's Ministry of Natural Resources and Development submitted a proposal to have the monastery included on the country's Tentative List, the first major step to having the site designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This proposal fuels much of the gossip and conversation of those who pass their days at the monastery. Some are enthused about the possibility of global recognition, the chance to spread the teachings of the Buddha, and share Nakhon's history. However, the proposed designation has also created anxiety, conflict, and confusion within the community, particularly among those who feel they were marginalized by the local and central governments that decided without their input to proceed with the proposal. These skeptical locals are concerned about the implications that the UNESCO designation, which comes with externally imposed stipulations and regulations, would have not only on their daily lives, but also on local customs and Buddhist rituals at the monastery. Moreover, the reshaping of Wat Phra That's objects landscape affords the opportunity to examine how material culture shapes and is shaped by not only contemporary Buddhist practice, but by the desires of some for a more globalized, and profitable, space.

## CHAPTER TWO

### CONCEPTUALIZING INTERSECTIONAL THERAVĀDA: HOW THE CHRONICLES OF NAKHON AND ITS 84,001 RELICS CONSTRUCT COMMUNITY

*The webs of intertextuality are tangled.*  
~Peter Skilling<sup>1</sup>

Sitting on a small, mosaic bench in the large courtyard of Wat Phra That, it is easy to lose oneself gazing up at the main *chedi*'s golden peak, reflecting the light of the hot Nakhon Si Thammarat sun. Moving out from this centerpiece of the monastery and back into the outer courtyard, one finds shrines dedicated to local heroes of legend, including an approximately fifteen-foot tall replica junk ship and statues of Princess Hemachala and Prince Thonthakuman.<sup>2</sup> What seems at first to be a curious finding in southern Thailand, these statues are physical depictions of the Princess and Prince, who, according to the town's chronicle, smuggled the left eyetooth of the Buddha (*phra that khiao gaeo*) out of India, bound for Lanka. However, stormy seas (and Buddhist fate) would maroon them and the relic in Siam, where it would be hidden in a small hand-constructed sand dune on the shores of Nakhon.<sup>3</sup> After finally arriving to their original destination of Lanka, that king would send the relic back to Nakhon, where a portion of it was safely buried.<sup>4</sup> Eventually that relic would be enshrined in the town's *chedi*. It is there that this relic of the Buddha (*phra borom saririkkathat*) is still venerated today.

---

<sup>1</sup> Skilling 2012b: 336

<sup>2</sup> When specifically discussing the tales in the chronicles, I will use the spelling they provide. Elsewhere, I will be using the shortened versions of the honorific, contemporary Thai, Phra Nang Hemachala and Phra/Phra Chao Thonthakuman.

<sup>3</sup> According to geologists, the sea has continued to move further east, thus leaving approximately thirteen kilometers between the current town and modern seaside (Munro-Hay: 5). So, although the monastery and *stūpa* are now inland, in theory, the relic could have been buried on a beach.

<sup>4</sup> Once arriving back in Nakhon, four Brahmins and the siblings as its shepherd, the relic was split into two portions. One stayed in Nakhon and the other was sent back to the hometown of the siblings in India.

This tale of Prince Thonthakuman and Princess Hemachala, with the relic of the Buddha's tooth harbored securely in her locks, fleeing India and bound for the shores of Lanka, has for centuries been a fixture in the narrative imaginations of Buddhists; the 12<sup>th</sup> century *Dāṭhavaṃsa* most famously referencing the account.<sup>5</sup> While the relic's historiography is widely attested in renowned Lankan chronicles (*vaṃsa*), these historiographic claims are challenged by lesser-known, local chronicles from Nakhon, collectively referred to as *The Crystal Sands: The Chronicles of Nagara Śrī Dharrmarāja* (hereafter referred to as *Crystal Sands*). Perhaps even more surprisingly, the chronicles lays claim to another 84,000 relics as they purport Nakhon to be the original home of the 84,000 relics of the Buddha enshrined throughout India by King Dharmāśoka (i.e., King Aśoka of India, the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE Mauryan ruler) — contesting famous accounts in the *Thūpavaṃsa* and the *Lokapaññatti*, a Southeast Asian cosmological text.<sup>6</sup>

This chapter will show how the historiographies of the relics in *Crystal Sands*, whereby their locality is established in Nakhon Sri Thammarat, create links between the peninsular town and the greater Buddhist world, namely Sri Lanka and India. I argue that *Crystal Sands* belongs in an area of conceptual juncture, what I call “Intersectional Theravāda,” by demonstrating that the chronicle, written not in Pali, but in vernacular Thai and in the Thai *tamnan* style, draws from the Pali *imaginaire* but also manipulates it to suit its own purposes.

The relic histories in *Crystal Sands* are not simply about the legitimation of the town or its rulers, and do more than attempt to antagonistically supersede other Buddhist localities in terms of importance in Buddhist history (e.g., by laying claim to the 84,001 relics). Rather,

---

<sup>5</sup> Strong writes, “Tooth relics tend to be the subjects of long sagas recounting their many movements. They are relics that go from country to country, to heaven or the realm of *nāga*, that get stolen or go into exile, that undergo epic adventures, again and again.” The tooth relics in China, as well as the one in Sri Lanka, are taken out and paraded through the streets during festivals and toured about in foreign countries (Strong 2004: 180). While the Buddha relic in Nakhon went on adventures, it is never seen or removed from the *chedi*.

<sup>6</sup> This is not to say these are the only texts that present the relevant narrative episodes. However, I have chosen to limit the scope of this chapter by focusing on these texts.

disparate geographic locales are united through this reworking of other widespread, trans-regional narratives. And so, with *Crystal Sands*, we have an instance of active, narrative engagement in a broader textual tradition (i.e., the Pali *imaginaire*), which thereby establishes connections with the greater Buddhist world — an act of Buddhist community building that ultimately preserves the *sāsana* (the “dispensation” of the Buddha, including the teachings, practices, community of practitioners, etc.).

### **On the *Crystal Sands* manuscripts**

*Crystal Sands*, the relic and town chronicles of Nakhon Sri Thammarat, are a blend of “myth, literature, and history” and were composed on the southern peninsula of Thailand.<sup>7</sup> David Wyatt has collected and translated three versions of what he dubs the *Crystal Sands* chronicle: 1) *Chronicle of the City of Nakhon Sri Thammarat (Tāmnām Muang Nagara Śrī Dharrmarāja)*,<sup>8</sup> referred to as Version A; 2) *Chronicle of the Holy Reliquary of the City of Nakhon Sri Thammarat (Tāmnām Phra Thātu Muang Nagara Śrī Dharrmarāja)*, referred to as Version B; and 3) a second version of the *Chronicle of the Holy Reliquary of the City of Nakhon Sri Thammarat (Tāmnām Phra Thātu Muang Nagara Śrī Dharrmarāja)* or Version B1.<sup>9</sup> The

---

<sup>7</sup> They are also referred to as the “Chronicles of Ligor,” referencing an old name for region (Wyatt 1975: 3).

<sup>8</sup> *Tamnan* histories, Thai vernacular texts, reside in Intersectional Theravāda. According to Charnvit Kasetsiri the Thai word *prawatsat*, equivalent to “history,” was not coined until Rāma VI’s reign (1910-1925). Prior to that, three words were used to connote various types of histories: *tamnan*, *phongsawadan*, and *chotmaimot*. *Phongsawadan* appeared after 17<sup>th</sup> century, were written by men serving the court, and typically chronicle the founding of a kingdom through its succession of kings and their activities (Swearer 2004: 147-148). Swearer adds that the Thai word *wongsa* (Northern Thai: *phongsa*; Pali: *vamsa*; Sanskrit: *vamśa*) “conveys the sense of dynastic annals, an account of a royal line or kingdom” as it “reflects one of the root meanings of the term, which refers to the connecting links in a stalk of bamboo,” and therefore the connections in royal genealogies (also explaining why “chronicle” is favored over the more accurate “lineage.”) He continues, “Etymologically the Thai term *tamnan* conveys a meaning quite similar to *vamsa*” (ibid.: 147-148).

<sup>9</sup> I follow Wyatt’s translations, and also use his shorthand by referring to all versions of the town chronicles collectively as “Crystal Sands.” Wyatt included careful transcriptions of Versions A and B1 into Thai characters, and so while I use his translations, I checked them against these provided transcriptions.

extant versions of *Crystal Sands* purport to be from the 16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> centuries and recount events reported to have happened as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century CE.

Wyatt believes the manuscript for Version A (*Chronicle of the City of Nakhon Sri Thammarat*) dates from the First Reign of the Bangkok Dynasty (1782-1809), although portions are perhaps earlier.<sup>10</sup> The town's legal officer at the request of central authorities put this copy together.<sup>11</sup> The compressed script in which it is written is “generally characteristic” of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and is distinct from that used in the 19<sup>th</sup> (e.g., with changes in some letter script). The language used is premodern Thai, which is quite similar to modern standard Thai but with word, tone, and spelling variations.<sup>12</sup> Prince Damrong Rajanubhab is said to have originally discovered the manuscript at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after which the first printed edition was released in 1935. According to the print edition, it was created from a “badly deteriorated,” white, Thai accordion-folded manuscript (*samut khoy*) and was written with “compressed Thai script” in black ink. A second edition, published in 1948, was reproduced directly from the first. The third edition was published in 1962 with a collection of ten pieces relating to the town and province; this edition was reprinted again in 1964, 1967, and 1974. All these printed editions are missing transcriptions of the final twelve folios of the manuscript, indicating that they referenced the first printed edition rather than the manuscript itself.

A manuscript for Version B (*Chronicle of the Holy Reliquary of the City of Nakhon Sri Thammarat*) could not be located by Wyatt, but the editor of the printed version dates it to the

---

<sup>10</sup> Wyatt located the original manuscript of forty-three folios (i.e., 21 recto and 22 verso) in the National Library in Bangkok.

<sup>11</sup> Wyatt 1975: 22; Wyatt wrote that this manuscript was intended to be public, however, it is unclear what he means by the notion of “public;” who in particular would have had the desire ability to read the manuscript, and how the text would have been made available to this “public?”

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*: 6-8

time of King Narai (r. 1657-88) because it was written on imported foreign paper.<sup>13</sup> However, this paper was only used as early as perhaps the 1820s and did not gain widespread popularity until after 1875. Moreover, modern spelling and tone markers are employed (if the published version does indeed accurately reflect the spelling of the manuscript). All of this would indicate a 19<sup>th</sup> century date for this manuscript's production. Nonetheless, according to Wyatt, the "general structure" supports an earlier dating, perhaps as early as the editor suggests, since it seems to have been compiled for a governor, who according to the print edition was appointed in 1654.<sup>14</sup>

The manuscript for Version B1, located by Wyatt in the National Library in Bangkok, was composed in a black, accordion book (*samut dam*) with white chalk, and comprises thirty-seven folios (26 verso and 11 recto). The script is "very informal, cursive nineteenth century," and the modern spelling accords with Version B. However, the orthography is at times "more archaic." While only corresponding to a portion of Version B, the manuscript itself is complete. Wyatt ascertains that B1 is "an early nineteenth century copy of an older manuscript," nearly duplicating portions of B. The date, 1553, of the governor for whom the manuscript was written is clear, and a century earlier than in B,<sup>15</sup> perhaps reflecting an approximate date for composition of the original text.

To summarize, Wyatt dates Chronicle A to the late 18<sup>th</sup>–early 19<sup>th</sup> century, based on the use of compressed script.<sup>16</sup> Using the only available evidence from the printed versions, a 19<sup>th</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> The manuscript was possibly procured by Prince Damrong around 1908, around the same time as Version A. Wyatt was unable to find a manuscript version of Chronicle B, however, and therefore relies on the printed edition that was first published in 1928 and republished in 1960. It was also included in later collections printed in 1962 and 1964 (Wyatt 1975: 22).

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*: 24

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*: 25; In a volume compiled by Thailand's Fine Arts Department, *Crystal Sands* is dated to c. 1553 (Wyatt 1976: 118).

<sup>16</sup> According to Munro-Hay (based primarily on Wyatt's conclusions) Chronicle A was copied sometime in the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, during the reign of Rama I (1782-1809) or during the reign of his successor between 1801-1825.

century copying date is likely for Chronicle B. However, the version references a governor of 1654, and so an original could possibly be dated to the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Chronicle B1 is an early 19<sup>th</sup> century copy and references a potential original from 1553, moving the date of this version up to a century earlier than Version B.<sup>17</sup>

While in this chapter I will focus only on the portions of *Crystal Sands* recounting events related to relics of the Buddha, other portions of the chronicle deal with administrative and political issues (e.g., collections and payments of taxes to Ayutthaya, tribute payments of tin and gold and silver flowers to Ayutthaya at various times, information about laws and complaints, and land and labor assignments).<sup>18</sup> All versions share accounts of, among other things, the founding of the city, the establishments of its twelve tributaries, its destructions by epidemics and subsequent rediscoveries, a story about the Sihing Buddha image, conflicts with Ayutthaya, connections with Java and Malay rules, local legends of treasure discoveries, rediscoveries and reconstructions of the Great Reliquary, marriage and land relations, wartime accounts, and labor roles and relations.<sup>19</sup>

### **Relic Tales in the Intersection**

There are two episodes in *Crystal Sands* that concern us here: the first (Episode One) recalls the journey of the Buddha's tooth, and the second (Episode Three in Wyatt's translation) is about the 84,000 relics needed to fill Aśoka's *stūpas* throughout the Indian subcontinent. The

---

This version was included in a set of documents to be sent to Ayutthaya during a land and labor case that was being disputed (Munro-Hay: 47).

<sup>17</sup> Version B has a more complete account of the relic incident (and it is only in this version that the Buddha's tooth is returned to Nakhon). Wyatt writes, "It seems likely that both A and B are based upon another, or other, local versions; and Version A's rendering of at least one name in phonetic spelling might suggest that perhaps A here is based upon an oral version of the written text upon which B may be based" (Wyatt 1975: 27).

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*: 19-21

<sup>19</sup> See Wyatt (1975) for complete translations of each of these versions, as well as transcriptions of Version A and B1. Wyatt also provides a detailed analysis of scripts and other supplemental sources.

two episodes draw on different texts written in Pali — the former from the *Dāṭhavaṃsa*, and the latter from the *Thūpavaṃsa* and/or *Lokapaññatti*.<sup>20</sup> By manipulating the narratives in these popular, trans-regional texts, the authors of *Crystal Sands* establish the importance of the peninsular town for the relic histories while simultaneously developing a connection with the greater Buddhist world.

Episode One in *Crystal Sands* parallels Chapter Four of the *Dāṭhavaṃsa*, a 12<sup>th</sup> century Lankan chronicle. Wyatt writes, “There are good reasons for believing both that the Pali text of this [i.e., the *Dāṭhavaṃsa*] (and other) work was known in Nagara [i.e., Nakhon Sri Thammarat], and that the people in Nagara believed that work to be relevant to their own history.”<sup>21</sup> Certainly, this is true. But, it is not quite so simple as this — the narrative had to be *made relevant* for the people in Nakhon. This was accomplished through altering the story of the tooth relic’s journey in the *Dāṭhavaṃsa*. Importantly, the tooth needed to take a detour through Nakhon on its way to Lanka. (See Appendix 1)

In *Crystal Sands*, siblings Princess Hemamālā/ Hemajālā (version A and B of *Crystal Sands*, respectively) and Prince Dhanakumāra/ Dandakumāra (version A and B of *Crystal Sands*, respectively)<sup>22</sup> flee the Indian town of Nagapurī during wartime as rivals come to seize the tooth relic. On the orders of their father, King Gośrīharāja/Kosīharāja (version A and B of *Crystal Sands*, respectively), the pair embarks on their journey as they flee for Lanka in the interest of safekeeping the relic from seizure by an opposing king’s attacking army. The pair board a boat bound for Lanka, with the tooth relic secured tightly in the hair of the princess. However, their

---

<sup>20</sup> It should be clear that these texts are not mutually exclusive from each other; the authors of the *Thūpavaṃsa* utilized tales told in the *Mahāvaṃsa*, and the *Lokapaññatti* eventually adding to the Pali *imaginaire* by utilizing a similar episode.

<sup>21</sup> Wyatt 1975: 26

<sup>22</sup> While recounting this story, I follow the chronicle and refer to the pair as Princess Hemamālā and Prince Dhanakumāra. When referring to contemporary practice, I use the Thai, Hemachala and Thonthakuman.

boat capsizes and they wash up on the Siamese “crystalline beach” of Nagara.<sup>23</sup> As the legend continues, in 311 AD,<sup>24</sup> Hemamālā and Prince Dhanakumāra erect a small pagoda on this beach (*hat sai kaeo*), bury the relic within it, and go into hiding.<sup>25</sup> Next, an elder *arahant*, Brahmadeba, happens to be flying over the beach and sees the relic buried in the newly created dune; he descends to venerate it and speak with the siblings. Hearing their harrowing tale, he vows to protect them throughout their journey to Lanka. He also, although at different points in Versions A and B, makes a prediction about the future establishment of Nakhon with a great reliquary by a great King Aśoka (*Crystal Sands: Śrī Dharmāśokarāja*), who shares his name with the King Aśoka of India, the 3<sup>rd</sup> BCE century Mauryan ruler. Assured by the *arahant*, Hemamālā (who in version A returns the tooth to her updo) and Dhanakumāra board a ship in Trang, a town on the opposite side of the peninsula, bound for Lanka. On the way, the boat comes to an unexpected stop in the sea; the ship’s crew blames them for the delay and threatens them with death. After the pair calls Brahmadeba to mind, he comes to their rescue in the form of a great *garuḍa* (an enormous bird-like creature and the mythological nemesis of the *nāga*, giant sea serpents), with a wingspan of either 3,000 or 300 meters depending on the chronicle version. The great *arahant* explains that the delay was caused not by the pair but by the king of the *nāga*, who had come to venerate the relic. The ship’s crew, satisfied with the explanation (and presumably the wondrous display of the *arahant*!), sails on successfully to Lanka. In Version A, the shorter of the two versions, the tale ends here, not recounting how the relic is returned to Nakhon. However, in Version B, the ruler of Lanka orders that the tooth relic should be carried

---

<sup>23</sup> No attention is paid as to how the couple washed ashore on the far side of the Siamese peninsula. In Version A, they make their way “through a thick forest” before arriving on the beach, but this narrative detail may have more to do with paralleling the *Dāṭhavaṃsa* than it does with making the story geographically more believable.

<sup>24</sup> According to an information brochure distributed at Wat Phra That.

<sup>25</sup> Every year as part of the Thai New Year celebrations, families come together to build small, sand *chedi* in the main courtyard of Wat Phra That. As the courtyard is filled with miniature sand *stūpa*, the first arrival of the Buddha’s relic on the beaches of Nakhon is recreated.

back to Nakhon to the beach where it was first buried. Upon arrival at the beach, a portion of the relic is placed in a golden dish, reburied in the sands of the crystalline beach, and set up with the protection of a *bhābayantra* (a robotic guardian of sorts); the other portion is returned to the hometown of Hemamālā and Dhanakumāra.<sup>26</sup>



**Images 2.1 and 2.2:** Hemachala and Thonthakuman in front of a junk ship (left); Close up showing Hemachala holding the relic casket (right) (photos by author)

The basic story in the relevant portion of the *Dāṭhavaṃsa*<sup>27</sup> is that King Guhasiva, fearing defeat by an invading army, gives his daughter’s husband, Prince Danta, the Tooth Relic to smuggle out of the city. Danta, with the help of powerful deities, crosses a flooded river and hides the relic in a sand dune, before returning to retrieve his wife, Hemamala. (It should be noted that in the *Dāṭhavaṃsa* the couple have not yet boarded the ship to Lanka when they bury the relic in the dune.) They then return to a thick forest near the buried relic, where an elder monk casually flying past sees their worship and the “varicoloured rays” produced by the buried

<sup>26</sup> Wyatt writes, “There are good reasons for believing both that the Pali text of this [i.e., the *Dāṭhavaṃsa*] (and other) works was known in Nagara [i.e., Nakhon Sri Thammarat], and that the people in Nagara believed that work to be relevant to their own history” (Wyatt 1975: 26). Pali Buddhism spread to mainland Southeast Asia in the first millennium, but was for the most part unconnected with larger-scale polities. It does not begin to be imported by kings as part of the state-building enterprise until the 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries (Collins 1998: 30). Moreover, we know that Pali texts were prevalent in Southeast Asia after the 11<sup>th</sup> century (Skilling 2012b: 343-345).

<sup>27</sup> The *Dāṭhavaṃsa* is said to have been based on the Sinhalese *Daladāvaṃsa* by Dhammakitti in the latter part of the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

relic. He descends, venerates the relic, and vows to protect the couple. They later call on his services as the king of the *nāgas* emerges, invisibly, from the river to swallow the precious object encased in its golden casket. Taking the form of a *garuda* in order to confront the *nāga*-king, the powerful elder is able to convince him to return the relic. After performing a midair miracle, the relic descends into Hemamala's hair as it continues to emit beautiful rays of light. The couple board a ship in India, but are delayed for another week as the *nāgas* continue to make offerings. Afraid they will never be able to proceed to their final destination, they again call to mind the elder, who once again taking the form of the *garuda*, disperses the *nāgas*. At long last, the ship is able to sail on and they arrive safely on the island of Lanka.

As can be seen in detail in Appendix 1, the basic storyline of the *Dāṭhavaṃsa* is maintained; the two protagonists charged with the protection of the tooth relic eventually succeed in its delivery to Lanka, albeit only with the help of a powerful, Buddhist elder, who helps them overcome the obstacles created by *nāgas*. In both stories the relic is temporarily buried. Notably, in *Crystal Sands* we are given the prediction about the establishment of the city and its great reliquary, and the tale of the return of the relic to Nakhon. These narrative changes produce a direct connection between India, Nakhon, and Lanka, while simultaneously giving an explanation for the tooth relic's residence on the peninsula. Importantly, in *Crystal Sands* it is Hemachala who is charged with holding the relic on her person throughout the story; her brother is never entrusted with this task. As will be shown in Chapter 4, she continues to be honored in Nakhon for this act of heroism.

In the second episode concerning relics in *Crystal Sands*, King Asoke of Nakhon<sup>28</sup> receives a letter from King Aśoka of India requesting 84,000 relics to fill the *stūpas* he has had constructed.<sup>29</sup> Through their shared name, the two pious kings are immediately revealed to be auspiciously connected. After offering a chunk of gold large enough to choke a horse to anyone in the town who can locate the buried relics, a 120-year-old man comes forward saying that he learned of the buried relics as a boy when his father would take him to the spot of the buried *chedi* to offer flowers. Digging commences and the concealed *cetiya* is revealed,<sup>30</sup> as are mechanical, robotic guards (*phap yon* or *phappa yon*<sup>31</sup>) set in motion to protect it.<sup>32</sup> In an attempt to dispel the robots, King Asoke of Nakhon offers another chunk of gold (again one so large it could choke a horse) to anyone with the knowhow to disable the animated guards. A poor man comes forward saying that his father, who was skilled in the arts of *phap yon*, had smuggled the knowledge of their secrets out of Romavisaya (“region of Roma”). However, he was

---

<sup>28</sup> Wyatt tries to historically read the episode and concludes that King Aśoka of Nagara was the former Narapaṭī of Pegu, who founded the city (identified by his name and Hansāvati, the name of Pegu, in the manuscripts) (Wyatt 1975: 27-28). This documentary reading of the chronicle differs from my purpose here.

<sup>29</sup> In a further connection between the two kings named Aśoka, Nakhon was sometimes referred to as Pataliputra, the capital of King Aśoka of India (Munro-Hay: 234). According to Berkwitz, “Generally speaking, monarchs in largely Buddhist lands could reinforce their images as devout rulers by public displays of *stūpa* building and ceremonies honoring relics in their possession, which served to legitimate their power and authority in society. Indeed, legendary accounts of King Aśoka’s construction of 84,000 relic shrines throughout his reign testify to both his piety and his attempt to make visible his authority throughout the empire” (Berkwitz 2007: 14). While this is a valid interpretation of Aśoka’s actions, it does little to explain why the narrative would be altered and included in *Crystal Sands*, since these relics eventually leave Nakhon (i.e., they are not (even mythically) enshrined on the Siamese peninsula and so do not serve as a visual testament to his authority Buddhist piety.

<sup>30</sup> According to Strong, the secret, underground chamber and the inscription predicting Asoka’s arrival “have all the earmarks of a tradition intended to give legitimacy and antiquity to relics that were—as the story itself admits—lost and forgotten.” This is a story of “pseudo-esoterism” (Strong 2004: 131).

<sup>31</sup> In modern Thai, this means a movie or theatrical performance, but it appears in *Crystal Sands* meaning the mechanical guards of the relic chamber. *Yantra* (Pali) or *yan* (Thai) are visual diagrams or arrangements of shapes, letters, lines, etc. believed to exert various powers, provide protection, etc. Wyatt leaves this word untranslated but alters the transliteration to *bhābayantra*. He says the phrase can also mean “an arrangement of physical objects, usually in a circular form, which exert magical force; for example, a ring of gold bricks built into the upper stages of a *cetiya*” (Wyatt 1975: 70).

<sup>32</sup> Unlike other images or actual sentient beings, the robots are never thought to be “living.” Living beings, like *nāgas* or other spirits that protect relics are also at risk of becoming attached to them and therefore not want to give them up. In this instance, there is no threat of the robots refusing to give up the relics (although their presence itself represents a real danger) once Asoke comes to retrieve them (Strong 2004: 133).

executed by beheading.<sup>33</sup> Luckily, the man in Nakhon, his son, had copied them and still had them in his possession. Thereupon, the robotic guards are disarmed (In Version A, this is done by finding and frying a prescribed medicinal leaf.) Finally, this act sends heat to Indra, who dispatches Viśnu to retrieve the relics and disperse them throughout King Aśoka of India's *stūpas*. In Version B, after the relics are retrieved, they are further divided before 84,000 of them can be sent to King Aśoka of India (presumably then, in this version, some portions stay in Nakhon). (See Appendix Two)

In the *Thūpavaṃsa*, after completing the construction of 84,000 monasteries with the help of a powerful monk, Aśoka of India begins looking for hidden relics. After fruitlessly searching many *chedi* throughout his whole territory, he calls on the help of the *sangha*, the community of monks and nuns. An elderly monk of 120 years comes forward saying that when he was seven, an older relative of his had him bring flowers to a particular spot while reminding him that there was *stūpa* buried there. Thereafter, Aśoka has the area excavated, revealing the *cetiya* and its surrounding walls, replete with "wooden figures carrying swords in their hands revolving."<sup>34</sup> After summoning "necromancers" and conducting a sacrifice, Aśoka appeals to the gods for help in removing these ferocious obstacles. And so, Sakka (Indra) dispatches Vissakamma (Viśnu), who disguised as a village boy, assists the monarch by disabling the mechanical guards with his bow and arrow. After retrieving the relics, Aśoka deposits them into his 84,000 *cetiya*.

---

<sup>33</sup> In version B, Wyatt writes, "Using [the power of] the *bhābhayantra*, [his] teacher came and cut off his head and took it away." These bracketed insertions by Wyatt may not be necessary, however, as the *bhābhayantra* could have themselves cut off the man's head (as in the *Lokapaññatti*). In that case, the text would read, "Using the *bhābhayantra*, the teacher came and cut off his head and took it away."

<sup>34</sup> Jayawickrama 1971: 53

The *Lokapaññatti* or “Description of the World,” is a popular Southeast Asian text, written in Pali but based on Sanskrit sources (primarily the *Lokaprajñapti*).<sup>35</sup> K.R. Norman dates the text to the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century and to a monk commonly referred to as Saddhammaghosa (among other names) of Thanton, Lower Burma.<sup>36</sup> It is principally a cosmological treatise, offering a description of the universe, its creation and destruction, and the types of beings that inhabit various realms. It is also replete with stories. Additionally, the *Lokapaññatti* is a primary source text for the famous 14<sup>th</sup> century, Thai cosmological treatise, the *Traibhūmikathā*. Importantly for our purposes here, it is in the *Lokapaññatti* that we encounter the brief episode in which Aśoka of India comes to acquire entombed relics of the Buddha, protected by mechanical robots from Romavisaya. Also named in *Crystal Sands*, “Roma” is likely a placeholder for a distant, foreign locale to the west, and perhaps according to Daud Ali, it may “be a Pali-zation of the Arabic *Rūm*, denoting the Byzantine Empire,” rather than referring to classical Rome.<sup>37</sup>

As the story goes,<sup>38</sup> at some point, Roma was home to experts trained in the secrets of *bhūta-vāhana-yanta*, “machines that were the vehicles of spirits,” or “machines animated by a spirit.”<sup>39</sup> These experts, knowledgeable as they were in the esoteric mechanics of these robots, were never supposed to leave Roma and thereby transport this information to other locales. However, a young man in Pātaliputra wants to learn the secrets of the robots and import the knowledge into India. He thus vows to be reborn in Roma. This then happens, whereupon he

---

<sup>35</sup> It is indeed interesting that the Pali *Lokapaññatti* was based on a Sanskrit source. While beyond the scope of this paper, this adds another complexity to the conceptual outline I have offered — we have a Pali text, based on a Sanskrit source, which likely drew from other Pali sources. Here authors composed texts in two prestige languages, but chose one over the other (i.e., Pali was selected for the Southeast Asian text).

<sup>36</sup> Strong 1992: 186; For additional information on the text’s dating see: K.R. Norman: 1983: 174-175.

<sup>37</sup> Ali 2016: 22-25

<sup>38</sup> My summary is derived from my translation of the Pali *Lokapaññatti*, completed in the spring of 2013 during a course with Steven Collins. I have included only the most relevant portions of the story here.

<sup>39</sup> The Pali compound leaves open the possibilities that these were either flying, sword-wielding machines, or that they were machines mounted by sword-wielding beings.

subsequently marries the daughter of a robot-mechanic in Roma, receives the essential knowledge of the robots (Pali: *bhūtāvāhanayantaṃ*) from the father, and has a son, Lakkhī.<sup>40</sup> Still wishing to take the secrets back to India, but knowing he will be killed if he attempts to leave, he hides the secret formula on his inner thigh. As he is trying to flee, the pursuing, flying robots cut him down, but his son, knowing where the formula was hidden, retrieves it before the cremation of his father. Then, sneaking away at night, he travels back to Pātaliputra where Ajātaśatru is looking for someone to construct robots to protect the Buddha's relic chamber.<sup>41</sup>

A century later, Aśoka offers a thousand coins to whoever is able to locate the spot where the *cetiya* and relics are buried. A 120-year-old *bhikkunī* (Buddhist nun), irritated at being rudely awoken by the racket created by the king's men searching the town, comes forward. She says that when she was seven years old her *bhikkhunī* preceptor made offerings at a particular spot.<sup>42</sup> This spot is then excavated revealing a series of roofs over an elaborate, circular relic chamber adorned with jewels, protected by several walls, and guarded by mechanical robots designed to attack anything they came into contact with in the interest of defending the relic.<sup>43</sup> At this point, King Aśoka makes a pronouncement that anyone able to destroy the sword-welding robot protectors will receive a thousand coins. The son of the machinist from Roma comes forward to combat the guards, which are unable to cut him down from behind before he destroys them. With

---

<sup>40</sup> Denis 1977: 157

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*: 158; Strong suggests that the robotic preventative measures against theft parallel the Buddha's father's attempts at preventing him from leaving the palace (particularly when certain stories have the relics set in a likeness of the Buddha's horse, Kanthaka). He also notes, "the Roman robots and other armed guards described above were intended not only to keep thieves out but also to keep the relics in" (Strong 2004: 134-135).

<sup>42</sup> It is interesting to note that in the *Lokapaññatti*, it is a woman who is responsible for locating the spot to be excavated.

<sup>43</sup> Denis 1977: 159-160

the robots no longer a threat, the king retrieves the Kanthaka-shaped<sup>44</sup> relic casket and the encased relic, which he breaks into 84,000 pieces to fill 84,000 *stūpas*.<sup>45</sup>

As can be clearly seen in Appendix 2, the narrative similarities between *Crystal Sands*, the *Lokapaññatti*, and the *Thūpavaṃsa* are striking. The authors of *Crystal Sands* have forged an undeniable link between the peninsular town, India, the most renowned and righteous Buddhist king — without Nakhon, one of the most famous acts in Buddhist historiography, the filling of Aśoka’s *stūpas*, would never have been completed. And so, in this narrative construction, the two locals are now intimately and permanently connected. Episodes One and Three suggest a concern with Buddhist history and other Buddhist locales, which ought to be (at least in the minds of the authors) connected directly to Nakhon. This is done through creating a translocal, textual network. This network utilizes an overarching, trans-regional framework (i.e., the Pali *imaginaire*) and links the worlds of vernaculars and regional Pali texts.

### **Intersectional Theravāda**

In this section I provide a theoretical model of the interaction between the aforementioned narratives. In doing so, I will attempt to flesh out the, at times imprecise, theory of the Pali *imaginaire* as presented by Steven Collins in *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities* (1998) and “What is Literature in Pāli?” (2003).<sup>46</sup> I argue that in order to successfully understand and then implement the concept of the Pali *imaginaire*, we must see how it works in relationship to lived Buddhisms, vernaculars and Pali texts themselves. What is revealed in this proposed

---

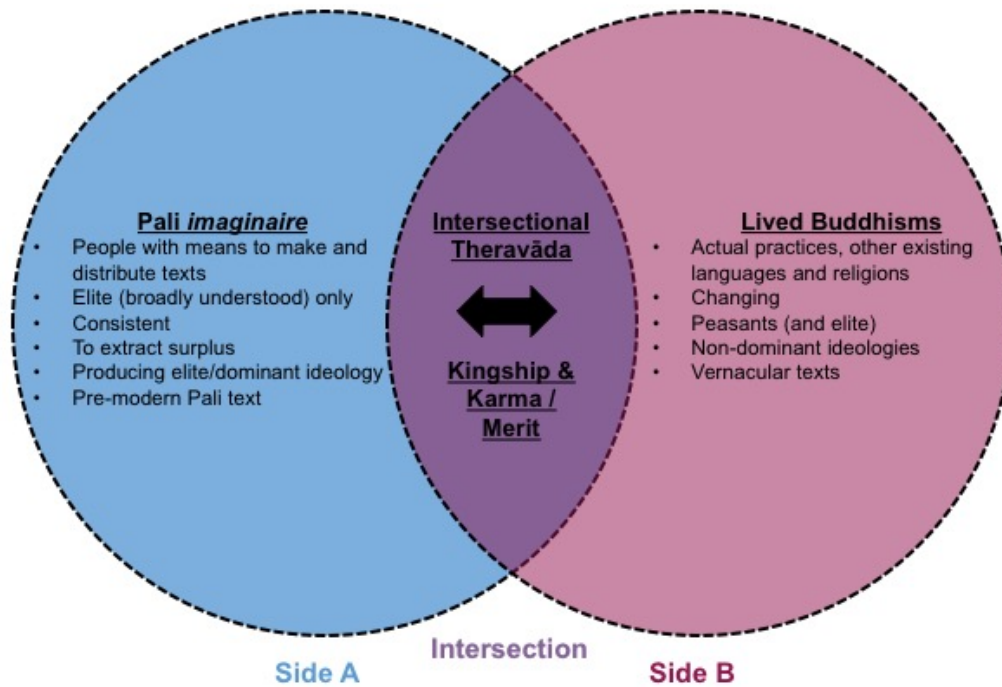
<sup>44</sup> Kanthaka is the name of the Buddha’s beloved horse, which he rode out of the palace on the night he began his quest for enlightenment.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*: 161

<sup>46</sup> Beyond these two texts, for the following interpretations are also derived from a graduate course, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, taught by Collins in the autumn of 2013. I would like to thank my fellow classmates and Collins for the insights they provided, which I utilize here.

schema is a space of conceptual overlap, in which texts written not only in Pali, but also in vernaculars, can reside. I call this area “Intersectional Theravāda” and it is here that we can locate *Crystal Sands*.

**Figure 2.1: Theravāda in the Intersection**



This theoretical categorization is important in that it allows us to move beyond vague language that tends to simplify both historical processes and the creativity of authors, and thus allows us to move beyond the common but misguided scholastic paradigm that Siam was the passive recipient of Buddhism from South Asia. For example, it is easy to say indigenous Thai religious practice was “influenced” by Indian traditions or *Crystal Sands* “borrowed” from a Lankan

chronicle.<sup>47</sup> However, this tells us very little. As Peter Skilling reminds, “Texts did not float through space to emanate an influence over Siam and then miraculously appear in written form. The concept of influence must be used sparingly and carefully: at best it is a convenient shorthand, at worst it carries with it fundamental distortions.”<sup>48</sup> To avoid this clumsy and unhelpful language, I have theorized the conceptual category of Intersectional Theravāda.

The schema as illustrated in Figure 1 is my attempt to incorporate the relationship between new, localized Pali and vernacular texts, which are (at least explicitly) absent from Collins’ theory. When Pali literature (*kāvya* and *vaṃsa* texts, for example) is produced by the elite (kings and others with political and social power) *and* promotes that ideology, it can be included in the Pali *imaginaire*. Vernacular texts (e.g., *Crystal Sands*) that draw on the Pali *imaginaire* are not part of it but access its content (e.g., the *Dāṭhavaṃsa*). In doing so, these texts do not necessarily promote an elite ideology, since their objectives may be those of the non-elite (e.g., connecting Nakhon to the greater Buddhist world or, as will be shown in Chapter Four, exalting a female heroine). It is my contention that we must take this as the given (i.e., the possibility of dissent in the vast array of Pali texts unexamined by Collins), rather than the assumption that we will find uniformity and stability. In other words, while it is possible that widespread uniformity will be found across Pali and vernacular texts regarding certain soteriological claims (e.g., the felicity of *nibbana*), is it ultimately these large overarching claims that matter most? Or, ought we as scholars look for details, adjustments, amendments, and contradictions? As will be discussed in more detail below, in Collins’ sociological-historical model, the arrow representing the sociological and geographical spiral in the intersection would

---

<sup>47</sup> In fact, in his introduction to the *Crystal Sands* translation, Wyatt writes, “In such a tale, folklore and borrowing from other literary and historical traditions would not be out of place, and indeed we have them in Version A” (Wyatt 1975: 19).

<sup>48</sup> Skilling 2009: 40

only point in one direction from the *Pali imaginaire* towards Lived Buddhisms.<sup>49</sup> This model privileges the *Pali imaginaire* as temporally first and Lanka as the geographical origin, without attending to how vernaculars composed in other regions in turn affected this *imaginaire* and how other locals were actively engaged in the reception of the ideas it contained. In my model, the arrow pointing both ways shows how the ideology of the *Pali imaginaire* and local Buddhisms are in constant interaction, and how new, vernacular and Pali texts can be created to incorporate local particularities.<sup>50</sup> My proposed model highlights mutual influence, while preserving much of what Collins seems to intend in his theory, including the notion that certain ideals and values (e.g., righteous kingship, merit merit-making, *karma*) are reified through the Pali texts of this *imaginaire*. We can also see how these come to be embodied by practitioners in Intersectional Theravāda.<sup>51</sup>

In looking at the texts this way we can see individual engagement by those acting on behalf of different interest groups.<sup>52</sup> We know that Pali texts have been produced in Southeast

---

<sup>49</sup> It is not my intention to propose a homogeneous system of beliefs and practices called Theravāda Buddhism. The difficulties and futility of this type of project have been discussed at length, and any exposure to various Buddhist countries confirms the absurdity of such a thing. However, this paper shows that regardless of the label given, *Crystal Sands* demonstrates an attempt to formulate a connection with a broader community — presumably assumed to have similar values and ideals, but at the very least, a shared historiography and import placed on these particular relics.

<sup>50</sup> The scale of the Venn diagram is imprecise. Indeed, Intersectional Theravāda should be much larger than the *Pali imaginaire*, and Lived Buddhisms even larger still.

<sup>51</sup> I am not concerned here with the category of “literature” and its relationship to other types of texts, as Collins is in his 2003 article. He writes, the “concept of literature, when it is more specific than ‘what is written,’ overlaps with that of ideology, but differs in significant ways,” since Pali literature (for his purposes, Pali *kāvya*) takes “elements adapted from an elite ideology” to express “ideas and values other than those of the dominant ideology.” “Pali literature” in the broadest sense has to do with the “naturalization of inequality,” since *kāvya* texts were also seen as a “prestige objects” that contributed to the “symbolic capital” of kings. He writes, “Pali *kāvya* [. . .] was never identical to ‘high culture,’ but interacted with Sanskritic and vernacular forms of it” (Collins 2003: 32-33). This type of “interaction” is similar to what I am describing here, although not the same since we’re dealing with Pali and vernaculars only. However, the *Lokapaññatti*, which *Crystal Sands* parallels, and which is derived from a Sanskrit original, may be closer to the position of Pali *kāvya* described by Collins.

<sup>52</sup> Collins 1998: 67

Asia since at least the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>53</sup> And although *Crystal Sands* was composed while there was no collective consensus about a Buddhist school or tradition unanimously referred to as “Theravāda,” the authors were positioning themselves within a greater Buddhist world that imagined itself with shared history and values.<sup>54</sup> Thinking about chronicles and the spread of relics in this way also pushes us to clarify the imprecise concept of “legitimation.” According to Wyatt, Thai chronicles are characterized by their association with Buddhism through their focus on Buddhist institutions, locations, images, reliquaries, and relics. He writes, “They could have been composed, in a sense, *to legitimize* their subjects by demonstrating the means by which they are linked to the Buddha, or showing how their subject has become and remains a repository of merit.”<sup>55</sup> Strong also writes that as relics travel to countries throughout the Buddhist world they “help *legitimate* empires here on earth and they further spread the dharma to places that the living Buddha never visited.”<sup>56</sup> I am suggesting that rather than *merely* legitimating the locality and/or kingship,<sup>57</sup> the chronicle’s narrative suggests the maintenance of a symbiotic relationship between multiple locales with mutual interest in preserving the *sāsana*. That is, a portion of the Pali *imaginaire* composed in Sri Lanka (i.e., the *Dāṭhāvamsa*) and a Southeast Asian Pali text (i.e., the *Lokapaññatti*) are creatively altered to suit Nakhon’s historiography and strengthen the

---

<sup>53</sup> According to Skilling, “The productive period of Pali in mainland Southeast Asian took place from the eleventh century on, when new works were translated, when temple and city complexes (Pagan, Nakhon Sri Thammarat, Ayutthaya, Sukhothai, for example) were conceived and built, and when legal codes were compiled, revised, and legislated” (Skilling 2012b: 343-345).

<sup>54</sup> See Perreira (2012). Perreira suggests that there is no evidence that prior to 1907 anyone in Asia, Europe, or Americas “attempted to collectively organize the Buddhisms of Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia under a Theravada banner” (pp. 452-453). In fact, it is not until the 1830’s when the term first starts gaining traction, and it is only after the 1950 Colombo Resolution that “Theravāda” gains widespread popularity. It is also at this conference, Perreira suggests, that Sri Lanka positions itself as the center of the global Buddhist world, rather than merely as the recipient of “true” Buddhism like had been done in the past (ibid.: 449).

<sup>55</sup> Wyatt 1976: 109, emphasis mine

<sup>56</sup> Strong 2007: 7, emphasis mine

<sup>57</sup> Exalting the position of local kings in relation to those elsewhere in the region and beyond was certainly part of the project of these chronicles. This comports with the proposed model, since the importance of kingship is a feature of Intersectional Theravāda.

town's position within the greater Buddhist world through linking the town to India, Sri Lanka, Aśoka, and the historical Buddha himself via his relics.<sup>58</sup> One way in which this is done is preserving a basic trans-regional narrative, including the return of the Buddha's eyetooth to Lanka and the installment of the relics into Aśoka's Indian *stūpas*. The authors of *Crystal Sands* could have chosen to completely rewrite the tale of the tooth relic so that it came to Nakhon and stayed there, in which case any connection with Lanka would have been severed. Particularly since the town still claims the installment of the relic in Wat Phra That, there was no reason they had to figure Lanka into the narrative — in fact, it would have been easier not to, since the relic could have arrived on the shores of Nakhon and stayed there.

Various Sri Lanka *vamsas* and “their historiographical conventions” were known throughout mainland Southeast Asia; evidence shows that the the *Thūpavamsa* and *Dāṭhāvamsa* (as well as the *Mahāvamsa*) were known in Southeast Asia, and thus “elements of their narratives likewise found their way into local Buddhist histories.”<sup>59</sup> There is even a verse version of *Crystal Sands*, of which the first half is focused on the story of the tooth relic. It explicitly states: “All that's told here/exists in Pali./Remember all/holy advice./Lacking these words,/remaining in sin,/leads one to hell.” While this verse chronicle seems to be based on the relic story as told in the *Dāṭhāvamsa*, the author, a woman, identifies the main characters of the tale as Thai, and includes other figures of legendary Thai folklore.<sup>60</sup> Thus, these *vamsas* were sometimes reimagined and incorporated into various types of local histories. As another example, in a famous Southeast Asian Pali text, the *Jinakālamālīpakaranam* (*Sheaf Garlands of*

---

<sup>58</sup> It is important to remember that “Buddhism did not necessarily come to Siam directly from Sri Lanka or India: it often came from the Mon country of coastal Burma” (Wyatt 2001: 6).

<sup>59</sup> Berkwitz 2007: 7

<sup>60</sup> Wyatt 1975: 50-51

*the Epochs of the Conqueror*; hereafter: *Jinakālamāli*),<sup>61</sup> local historical events are incorporate into the older Sri Lankan narratives of relics and kings. This “literary activity resulted in a fairly coherent Theravāda tradition of history writing that forged conceptual and sometimes institutional links between Buddhist communities in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia [. . . employing] various strategies to make their histories reflect local concerns and interests, domesticating the historical narratives they received by emphasizing native heroes and a local topography marked by shrines and monasteries found closer to home.”<sup>62</sup> Indeed, this conceptual link is what I am calling Intersectional Theravāda. A further point to be emphasized here is that Southeast Asian writers did not passively “add” to Sri Lankan accounts, but rather creatively adapted and purposed the tradition. In fact, *Crystal Sands* provides an example of how this was done.

*Crystal Sands* is a *tamnan*, a genre of Thai history writing that was most popular between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and continued to flourish into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Tamnan* typically focus on the Buddha, Buddhism, and the development of the *sāsana*. Because of the diversity of the genre, Swearer suggests *tamnan* “may be best understood in the primitive sense of the term, namely, a hollow stalk or container,”<sup>63</sup> since “*tamnān* takes its definition from its particular content rather than the other way around.”<sup>64</sup> This broad genre can be further nuanced through an examination of city chronicles (*mueang tamnan*), like the ones we find in Nakhon. As Wyatt writes:

---

<sup>61</sup> Written between 1516 and 1528 A.D. at Wat Pa Daeng in Chiang Mai by Phra Ratanapañña (Swearer 1976: 3).

<sup>62</sup> Berkwitz 2007: 8

<sup>63</sup> Wyatt divides Northern Thai *tamnān* into those “of the distant past” or “universal histories,” written in both Pali and Northern Thai, and “monumental histories,” which focus on Buddhist relics, images, and institutions (Swearer 2004: 149).

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*; “In addition to lengthy *Buddha tamnān* of several palm leaf bundles that provide a broad, comprehensive history of the Buddha’s travels in northern Thailand, virtually every significant monastery temple (Thai *wat*) and every hill or mountain (Thai *doi*) topped by a *cetiya* reliquary (Thai *chedī*) has its *tamnān*” (*ibid.*: 150).

As perceived by its local chroniclers, the earliest history of Nagara Sri Dharmmarāja had nothing directly to do with the empires of the classical antiquity of Southeast Asia, Angkorian Cambodia, Srīvijaya, or Pagān. What gave these chroniclers the confident sense of continuity which bridges numerous abandonments of the principality and ties together what to foreign readers seems highly disparate and even irrelevant material is their utter conviction that Nagara Srī Dharmmarāja [i.e., Nakhon] was blessed with the sacred presence of corporeal relics of the Buddha, a conviction which persisted at least as late as the early nineteenth century and almost certainly much later.”<sup>65</sup>

As is common in other *tamnan*, this relic of the Buddha “is linked by the chronicles to the foundation of a city before even mentioning the *stūpa* or the monastery to be built, which will protect it.” And so, in this way, the whole of Wat Phra That is “a kind of by-product of the relic.” In any case, the Buddha relic coming to Nakhon before proceeding on to Lanka (prior to its eventual return) and the 84,000 relics being discovered in Nakhon, for the authors of *Crystal Sands* irrevocably unites the Nakhon with Lanka and India, and situates the town within this narrative history. In doing so, Nakhon is able to place itself firmly within Buddhist historiography by connecting the *Crystal Sands* with other popular, relic narratives, positioning the town on the Buddhist ontological map. I am arguing that this is an act that seeks to preserve the greater Buddhist community, rather than a self-serving project of legitimation.

At this point, an explanation of the Pali *imaginaire* is (over)due. Collins, following Jacques LeGoff’s specific usage of the term, invokes the “imaginaire” as a “nonmaterial, imaginative world constituted by texts, especially works of art and literature.” This specificity directed toward a textual body is important to keep in mind as Collins explains the Pali *imaginaire* — this is not an abstract cultural package, nor is it meant to represent the complete *imaginaire* of premodern Southern Asian Buddhism (it is connected to material cultures of the time, for example, but it is not the same as these). The Pali *imaginaire* is described as a group of

---

<sup>65</sup> Wyatt 1975: 67; No doubt, the belief that Wat Phra That is the home of this relic of the Buddha not only persists, but to this day continues to inspire celebration and devotion.

ideas, a “mental universe,” or a “cultural-ideological project of ongoing collectivities”, produced by elites over a two thousand year period and contained in the Pali canon<sup>66</sup> and the many other Pali texts composed before the premodern period.<sup>67</sup> To be clear, it is different from individual Pali texts in that it represents their collectivity, the “Pali canon” in that it is composed of all Pali texts produced in the pre-modern period, and the “practical canon”<sup>68</sup> which was the collection of texts being used at any given place or time.<sup>69</sup> That is, while all variety of historical and societal changes occur, the ideological impetus of the Pali *imaginaire* (e.g., felicity, time and timelessness) remains stable and cohesive (at least until the modern period); as it was adopted by kings in changing situations, the ideology of Pali *imaginaire* remained remarkably stable.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, “In its socio-political aspect, this ideology had to do with naturalizing inequality in social hierarchies (e.g., through karma and the idea of merit), and with the pacification of populations, helping to make it possible for tribute-takers in the premodern agrarian states where the Teaching was established to extract a surplus from tribute givers. The ideology operates among the elite, primarily as an element in a nexus of power, as local power-holders are organized by a king into a mandala.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, the Pali *imaginaire* is preserved and developed, while not being disruptively changed; developing cosmology and soteriology with striking

---

<sup>66</sup> For a nuanced discussion of the history and composition of the Pali canon see Collins (1990). Since in this paper I am dealing with the Pali *imaginaire*, I am not focusing on discussions of canonicity in Thailand. The ancient commentarial tradition and the vague standards often applied to *buddhavacana* demonstrate how Buddhists sought continual interpretation of a somewhat open-ended doctrine. This process of interpretation expanded exponentially in Thailand, where the “canon” is perceived as ever-expanding and still open to new, unique interpretations. It is clear that the Pali canon (i.e., that of the Mahāvihāra of Sri Lanka) cannot be equated to the Thai canon. Justin McDaniel writes, “It might seem odd to refer to a canon as flexible and evolving; however this is how it is treated in Thai Buddhism”(McDaniel 2006: 122).

<sup>67</sup> Collins 1998: 57-58

<sup>68</sup> Anne Blackburn has elaborated on her idea of the “practical canon.” See: Blackburn, Anne. 1999. “Looking for the *Vinaya*: Monastic Discipline in the Practical Canons of the Theravāda.” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*. vol. 22, no. 2.

<sup>69</sup> Collins 1998: 78

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*: 87

<sup>71</sup> Collins 2003: 31

“coherence and stability,” a unity exemplified in the choice to use the prestige language of Pali.<sup>72</sup> Collins writes, “[. . .] the epistemology and ontology of Theravada [. . .] held that the changes of history are but variations on a timelessly given pattern of reality” (i.e., the *dhamma*).<sup>73</sup> In this way, the premodern Pali *imaginaire* served as a source of power for kings and other elites, since it perpetuated an ideology based on naturalized inequality and in doing so justified their positions and the tributes due to them.

As Collins’ historical hypothesis goes, at some point in Sri Lanka from the first century and in Southeast Asia from the second, there occurs between Pali and Theravāda Buddhism “an isomorphism between a single language and a unitary ideology.” In this coming together, elites chose to form a “Pali Cultural Package” (a phrase Collins borrows from Andrew Huxley), consisting of “Theravāda Buddhism, written law, and monastic institutions and lineages.” Thus, the choice to write in the prestige language of Pali indicates more than language preference — it also shows a privileging of “Sinhalese monastic lineages, the closed canon of the Mahāvihārin, and more generally the systematic and narrative thought of the Pali *imaginaire*.”<sup>74</sup> Out of this elite cultural package (including the Pali *imaginaire*), on-the-ground Buddhism develops out of a sociological and geographical spiraling downward and outwards, via one-way movement, from cities into rural area and from the upper classes into the lower. Collins outlines his hypothesis for the development of local religious practice, what I call Lived Buddhism, which is replete with local beliefs, popular practice, and vernacular texts. His theory is worth quoting at length:

Pali ideology was important in building the cultural coherence of such a dominant class, but had no part in the cultural coherence [of] the societies as wholes, since there was none. The general picture of cultural history I assume here, as an empirical hypothesis, is

---

<sup>72</sup> Collins 1998: 41-76; Collins accounts for changes in the *imaginaire* as shifts in points of emphasis, not as the addition of “unprecedented innovations” (ibid.: 88).

<sup>73</sup> ibid.: 88

<sup>74</sup> ibid.: 72

this: the premodern Pali *imaginaire* was an elite ideology, originally strongest in the cities (often with branches in outlying forest regions), which over the course of the second millennium AD moved, sociologically speaking, downwards and outwards, and at some point before or during the modern period became a ‘popular’ or peasant religion. My own guess as to when this happened would put it within the last two hundred years, as an aspect of the growth of nationalism.<sup>75</sup>

In sum, the Pali *imaginaire* and its contained elite ideology eventually (as recently as the within the last two hundred years) infiltrate popular religious practice through a sociological spiral; that is, the ideology of the Pali *imaginaire* moves unidirectionally until it becomes a religion of the masses. Collins writes, “And this world — widely valued whether or not it was directly appropriated — was transmitted to others without knowledge of Pali by vernacular compilations from Pali texts, such as the Thai Three Worlds treatise discussed earlier, vernacular narrative and other commentaries on Pali texts [. . .] and vernacular translations.”<sup>76</sup> What Collins fails to account for in this model is how these other texts, or networks of texts, could have had an impact on the Pali *imaginaire* itself, a problem compounded by his choice to only include Pali texts with Western editions.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, from the 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Pali texts were being composed and others translated in Southeast Asia, and so the sweeping generalization of uniformity until the last two hundred years seems hard to justify. Identifying soteriological consistency in a large corpus of texts seems to be one thing; positing that this consistency constitutes a static ideology that moved through space and time relatively undisturbed seems to be quite another.<sup>78</sup> When we

---

<sup>75</sup> Collins 2003: 32

<sup>76</sup> Collins 1998: 77

<sup>77</sup> In conversation, Collins told me that he chose to only use Western editions so that his sources could be widely checked by a diverse an audience as possible.

<sup>78</sup> In contrast to Collins’ primary thesis, Skilling argues against any persistent stability or cohesive ideology throughout the changes of the traditional period. Part of this results from Collins proposing such a long (indeed 2,000 year) traditional period. Skilling instead argues, “there is continuity, there is rupture, there is reformation, and there is reformulation, none of which avoid or inhibit change and reinvention.” In contrast to Collins’ “romantized” *imaginaire*, Skilling finds Buddhist history replete with “a matrix of ideas” that function in relation and response to historical circumstances, and are dependent on the choices people and authors make in how to define the universe,

take seriously the notion that people, and so too the texts they compose, listen, or react to, are complex networks of ideas and interactions, this sweeping consistency seems more unlikely.

To reiterate, Collins does not elaborate on the relationship between this Pali *imaginaire* and the composition of new, vernacular or Pali texts composed in various locales that perpetuate non-dominant ideologies, local characters, etc. That is, I am suggesting that the “Pali ideology” did not simply waft through space and time, but was contingent on the people and authors who interacted with it. These authors were able to draw on the relatively stable “mental universe” of the Pali *imaginaire*, while infusing their texts with new, local, and creative adaptations and additions — that is, they created texts that accessed portions of the Pali *imaginaire*, while creatively incorporating these new elements they presumably thought to be important enough for inclusion. These new texts, like the *Lokapaññati*, would then become part of the Pali *imaginaire* to be accessed by authors who could creatively adapt them, as was done in multiple iterations of Nakhon chronicles. These texts, like *Crystal Sands*, fit into the conceptual space of Intersectional Theravāda, since they bridge a gap left by Collins between the *imaginaire* and Local Buddhisms. Skilling writes, “it is not easy, or even possible, to say where borrowing, cross-referencing, and back-formation begin and end. The webs of intertextuality are tangled.”<sup>79</sup> And yet while the complete unraveling of these webs may never be possible, these relationships — between people

---

their place in it, and ways to secure fortune and “sacred strength.” As such, new narratives are constantly being constructed, with some rising to great heights of popularity.

Moreover, Skilling challenges the idea that the Pali *imaginaire* was most prevalent in cities and then moved outwards to rural areas and downward to lower classes. He argues that the “early diffusion of Buddhism in India and Lanka took place at multiple levels, and moved horizontally through the family, clan, and regional relations.” Buddhism was and remains “communal and shared.” Skilling emphasizes the importance of the individual, the Buddhist recipient and negotiator of ideologies. Thus, Skilling argues that looking only at textual sources (even if we included all vernaculars and locally composed Pali texts into our *imaginaire*) proves radically inadequate in capturing any sense of the “database” which created and creates lived Buddhism for its practitioners. Therefore, he argues we must look beyond texts to sermons, liturgies, “social etiquettes and hierarchies,” legal and educational patterns, and into the world of art, architecture, and material culture. Sermons, for example, not only reinforce social hierarchy, according to Skilling, but also the power and efficacy of the word of the Buddha, the “Phra Pali” (Skilling 2012b: 336-346).

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*: 336

and texts, ideologies and practices, vernaculars and Pali — allow us to imagine why certain narratives were manipulated, themes highlighted, and characters repurposed.

Stephen Berkwitz explains that particularly in communities where the individuals composing literature were multilingual, the examination of language choice allows for a more successful deduction of “the cultural significance of textuality.” He writes, “Whereas works written in languages such as Sanskrit and Pāli were produced with an awareness that they could be disseminated throughout a larger world wherein these languages were in currency among elites, vernacular writing was content with targeting a more geographically bounded audience.”<sup>80</sup> While Berkwitz argues that local language use in literature serves to forge new communities and produce local cultures, I am arguing here that producing vernacular texts that engage with the Pali *imaginaire* also narratively joins geographically disparate communities. Even though those in the Buddhist world beyond Nakhon could not read *Crystal Sands*, the text is positioning the town within this greater Buddhist world by creating new historiographical and narrative networks, and imagining social, translocal bonds.

Skilling writes, “Rarely if ever is there a case of straightforward borrowing: the Thai counterparts are creative adaptations, conscious recastings, of their ‘originals.’”<sup>81</sup> This is precisely what can be seen by looking at *Crystal Sands* in relationship to other texts — we have an extant example of Intersectional Theravāda, which among other things, demonstrates how the “transmission of literature is not passive: it involves agents, not recipients, and creativity.”<sup>82</sup> It is these “conscious recastings” which comprise Intersectional Theravāda in the form of vernacular

---

<sup>80</sup> Berkwitz 2007: 17; Berkwitz, following Sheldon Pollock, argues that “the decision to produce literature in local languages, a choice made with increasing frequency in southern Asia between 1000 and 1500 CE, signaled attempts to fashion new forms of communities [. . .] the choice to write in a local, vernacular dialect is not as innocent or natural as it may sometimes seem. Rather, the production of local literatures signals important transitions in the cultural histories of social communities” (ibid.: 7).

<sup>81</sup> Skilling 2009: 28

<sup>82</sup> ibid.: 9

chronicles like *Crystal Sands* and Pali texts created in the many centuries since the Buddha's life and "closing" of the Pali canon.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, pre-modern Siam was actively engaged in the exchange of ideas, and it is at best misleading and at worst erroneous to simply assume India and South Asia as the center of Buddhism and Siam as the periphery.<sup>84</sup> And while the authors of *Crystal Sands* did not necessarily self-consciously identify a unified Pali or Theravāda Buddhism, I argue that *Crystal Sands* demonstrates how they did, indeed, imagine, at least in some sense, a community bound by the biographies of arguably 84,001 of the most important Buddhist relics.<sup>85</sup>

## Conclusion

Clifford Geertz wrote, "[. . .] certain ideas burst upon the intellectual landscape with a tremendous force."<sup>86</sup> The concept of the Pali *imaginaire* — unleashed as it has been into the academic discourse of Buddhist Studies — is certainly one of these ideas. As scholars we need not wholly abandon it, nor reduce it to even more abstract concepts like "culture." It must, however, be nuanced. This nuance is achieved through a more dynamic conceptualization of the relationships between the *imaginaire*, the vernaculars and other Pali texts produced outside of Sri Lanka, and those who produced them.

In this chapter, I have shown how *Crystal Sands*, a vernacular Thai *tamnān*, is an example of Intersectional Theravāda through the authors' creative manipulation of Lankan *vaṃsa* texts and the Southeast Asian *Lokapaññatti*. I have proposed that rather than merely

---

<sup>83</sup> In Northern Thailand, for example, from approximately 1450-1525, dozens of original Pali compositions, including "pseudocanonical, cosmological, and commentarial works," were composed (Veidlinger 2006: 3).

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*: 40

<sup>85</sup> This imagined community is manifest in contemporary Nakhon Sri Thammarat at Wat Phra That in various ways. The *stupa* housing the Tooth Relic is said to be built (and in its previous constructions) in Sri Lankan style and is now, publically referenced as a "Theravāda Buddhist symbol."

<sup>86</sup> Geertz 1973: 3

understanding relic chronicles as a means of legitimating rulers and locales (although this is certainly a legitimate possible reading), *Crystal Sands* demonstrates how narrative can be used to position a town within the greater Buddhist community (*sāsana*); in doing so, this broader community is fostered and sustained.<sup>87</sup> This was done through a narrative positioning that firmly roots Nakhon in the historiography of one of the most important Buddhist rulers and 84,001 of the Buddha's relics. That is, rather than challenging other locales in an attempt to create legitimacy (i.e., one place as superseding the other in significance), a narrative has been created to incorporate, include, and connect to other places of import (i.e., an acknowledgement of the significance of multiple locales).

---

<sup>87</sup> Beyond the narrative examples, there are material manifestations of this connection to Sri Lanka throughout Wat Phra That. These include, for example, the Sri Lanka style bell shape of the principal *chedi* and a clipping from a Sri Lankan bodhi tree (said to have been originally clipped from the tree at Bodh Gaya under which the Buddha sat while attaining enlightenment).

## CHAPTER THREE

### A MATERIAL NODAL NETWORK, IMMATERIAL POTENCY, AND THE UTILITY OF A MONASTIC SPACE

*~Even when he tells of various miracles and garudas and nāgas, he does so as if he believed in them. To tell the truth, people still believe in the miracles of holy relics to the present day. –Prince Bidyalankarana<sup>1</sup>*

I watch as pigeons from the large flock that inhabits the monastery are enticed by giggling visitors to perch on their heads and outstretched arms. The eager birds are rewarded with handfuls of seeds. As a group of five Muslim women chat and stroll toward the market, two younger girls have their photo taken, their hands in the obligatory peace sign with the large *chedi* on full display in the background. Every so often a soft, passing breeze sweeps through the courtyard providing a couple moments of welcome relief from the stagnant heat, which is more intense than usual, even for hot season on Thailand's southern peninsula. The leaves of the Bodhi tree produce a familiar, calming susurration. A *dhamma* lesson is being read over the loud speaker, as a vendor sells brightly colored origami fish, four of each attached to a small, wooden stick. Some monastery dogs lounge in the shade, as others dig holes in search of cooler dirt for napping. A family walks past in matching shirts, an external display of their love for each other. A type of white noise peppered with honking pervades the courtyard as cars, trucks, and motorcycles steadily stream by on the main thoroughfare of the town that passes in front of Wat Phra That. A lottery ticket vendor hawks a few slips to a visitor, who is hoping today is his lucky day. However, he will not leave things strictly to chance. There is no need for that; he is at Wat

---

<sup>1</sup> Preface to the 1960 edition of the *Chronicles of Nakhon Si Thammarat* (cited and translated in Wyatt 1975: 23)

Phra That. Instead, he will ask for the numbers to be drawn in his favor, knowing it is a request something so powerful, no doubt can oblige.

Wat Phra That is a bustling place and one's senses of sound, smell, and sight are often overwhelmed. People come to shop, relax, debate, snack, and conduct research projects for school. However, the monastery's various objects, including a relic of the Buddha, are its biggest draw as these are able to affect real change in the lives of those who engage them. In this chapter I will briefly discuss the different classes of objects that together comprise what I call the nodal network. Then, I discuss the dynamics that combine to create the potency of a Thai Buddhist monastery. From there, I examine the theoretical dynamics of object agency. Since at Wat Phra That the relic is the central object both literally and figuratively, I then address the perennial question of the ontological status of the Buddha in relation to his relics. Finally, in examining pact-making (*kho bon gae bon*), I provide a concrete example of how the potency generated by the material network is maintained and accessed via Buddhist propitiation. In this practice, devotees seeking some sort of assistance make a request before an object of their choosing while simultaneously promising to fulfill an obligation demonstrating Buddhist piety if their request is granted. As one of the most common acts at any Thai monastery, a study of pact-making gives insight into how the nodal network is utilized when devotees embark on modest or rigorous practices of righteous self-cultivation via relationships with an object or image.

Thus, I am not concerned with art historical questions regarding dating or with merely labeling inherent Buddhist symbolism present in various images and structures.<sup>2</sup> I am not trying to identify artists (a notoriously difficult and often impossible task in Thai art) or evaluate the aesthetics of individual objects. Rather, I am interested in “not only what kinds of potencies are

---

<sup>2</sup> Art historical details about the structures and material contents of the monastic complex heavily dominate the research in Thai on the monastery.

inherent in objects themselves, but also how they empower and inspire the people who engage with them.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, the overarching goal of this chapter is to show how material objects with agency come to form a nodal network that produces a dynamic immaterial potency, which is then variously accessed and sustained by practitioners.

While all functioning within and contributing to the same network, however, we must be careful not to homogenize the different type of objects within the space or ignore the qualitatively different roles they perform. In general, there are four basic types of objects at Wat Phra That. First, the left eyetooth of the Buddha, a relic, is said to be enshrined in the principal *chedi*. While the focus of much devotion, it is never seen, touched, paraded about, or otherwise tactilely engaged with. It remains invisible to the visitor, and yet is simultaneously the main attraction and primary source of Buddhist potency at the monastery. The ontological difficulties regarding the relic’s relationship to the historical Buddha will be discussed below.

Second, the *chedi* that the relic is contained in was built to house the relic and externally display Buddhism and local prestige. Its base is comprised of a two level walkway (*wihan thapkasat*) and the relic chamber (*wihan phrama*). The towering central *chedi* and its composite parts act as a complex “frame” for the relic, aiding in the imaginative process confirming the relic’s existence (more so than the narrative historiographical texts that account for its arrival in the town, to be sure). Erving Goffman argues people know how they are supposed to behave in certain settings because there are frames that give particular indications as to what is expected. So, for example, while kicking a soccer ball around a monastic courtyard is acceptable, doing that same thing in the relic chamber, with its red carpet, images, and perhaps monks, would be wildly inappropriate. Instead, the ball kicker knows how to sit properly with the soles of their

---

<sup>3</sup> Bausita and Reid 2012: 9

feet facing away from the relic, make the correct hand gestures, and whisper rather than shout. According to Goffman, this is demonstrative of the fact that, even if unconsciously, people take note of their setting, including others occupying the space, and behave accordingly. Moreover, E.H. Gombrich has argued that when a frame for a piece of artwork is appropriate, it goes unnoticed, yet suggests a correct viewing of the art it surrounds. Building upon both of these ideas, Daniel Miller shows that objects filling a space, even though they “may appear inconsequential” and are often not paid attention to or consciously “seen,” are able to ensure normative behavior, determine expectations, and help craft individual identities. This is material culture as “much of what we are exists not through our consciousness or body, but as an exterior environment that habituates and prompts us.”<sup>4</sup> For our purposes, the monumentality of the central *chedi*, including the relic chamber and its elaborate base replete with a superabundance of objects, serves as a type of hyper-visual frame for the invisible Buddha relic. This frame reminds visitors of the importance of its contents, which warrant respect and can be utilized to achieve practical ends.

Another set of relics at Wat Phra That highlight the importance of framing. In the monastery’s museum, in a crowded cabinet at the back of one of the buildings and set among other various objects, including small images of monks, is a small cut-crystal dish. In the dish sits a plastic baggy containing several off-white fragments, their shape reminiscent of pebbles. In Thai, the sign says “*phra that*” indicating that these are some kind of relics. There is no other information, but relics are often retrieved from abbots or other high-ranking monks thought to have been particularly advanced along the Buddhist path.<sup>5</sup> I asked many people about these,

---

<sup>4</sup> Miller 2005: 4

<sup>5</sup> The English translation accompanying the Thai is incorrect since it indicates “Relics of the Buddha.” For a visitor unable to read the Thai, this would surely be confusing.

including the long-time volunteer and informal curator, and no one knew where they came from or to whom they once belonged. Many others were simply unaware of their existence. All of this is to emphasize the importance of setting (i.e., frame), accompanying rituals, background historiography, and an objects relationship to other images (i.e., all of this as part of an object's network). These relics are visible and yet so unimportant compared to the relic of the Buddha housed in the principal *chedi*, which is never seen by anyone. It is, in fact, the invisible relic motivates all types of action and affective responses acting as an agent and the nexus of potency at Wat Phra That.

The third class of materials includes larger images and objects, which may or may not be considered to house or mediate various beings. For example, these can be lifelike statues of monks and local heroes, smaller *stūpas* (e.g., those in which entomb the ashes of loved ones), Buddha images, auspicious trees, and small spirit houses. These materials can serve to connect one to their ancestors as the object acts as a conduit for the transfer of merit. When considered to have a resident being, tending to the image or object simultaneously cares for the inhabitant. Moreover, while recipients of routine offerings and bodily propitiation by passing devotees, it is also with these images that people develop close, personal, sustained relationships. As will be shown below, there is no requirement of inhabitation for an image to have agency, however, since this agency is enacted through the object's role as a social actor.

The fourth group of materials is comprised of smaller, supplemental objects. These may have been offered to a specific object or image or the monastery in general, they may function ritually, or simply adorn the monastery, perhaps while representing a Buddhist tenet. For example, twenty-two concrete elephants surrounding the base of the principal *chedi* are said to signify the twenty-two *indriya*, or spiritual faculties; the fifty-two rungs of the *chedi* denote the

fifty-two *cetasika* (the mental factors as elaborated in the *Abhidhamma*); and the eight walking Buddhas on the square base of the spire point to the centrality of the Noble Eightfold Path. Additionally, drums, bells, incense, candles, cloth, artifacts, donative gifts, a replica of the Buddha's footprint, secondary *stūpa*, boundary stones (Thai: *bai sema* or *sema hin*), gifts of thanks offered to certain images, etc. are all supplemental or donative items. These are distinct from the third type of images in that they are not thought to be inhabited by any being, and typically long-term relationships are not developed with them. These objects are vital in the nodal network, however, as they facilitate reciprocal relationships between devotee and other objects, are essential for the care of the beings that inhabit the images in group three, can be used in the fulfillment of pacts through giving, and significantly contribute to the “frame” of objects — all while simultaneously increasing the potency of the monastery as a whole.

### **The Dynamics of Potency**

To understand what I mean by the immaterial Buddhist potency that enlivens the nodal network, it is helpful to consider the intersection of a few concepts that animate objects. To do this, I rely on practitioners' articulations of why propitiation works. As one would expect, these complicated concepts are often conceptualized and ascribed variously among individuals. However, I repeatedly found auspiciousness (*sirimongkhon*), sacredness/holiness (*saksit*<sup>6</sup>), being influential (*itthiphon nai jai*), and having power (*amnat*) were considered as key components that

---

<sup>6</sup> Etymologically from the Sanskrit, *śakti* (Pali: *satti*) and *siddhi*; *śakti* is power, strength; *siddhi* is accomplishment, usually of a spiritual/religious nature. Together they can mean the “obtainment of power.” I thank Victor DaVella for this helpful clarification. The relic has attained its power through a physical connection with the Buddha. I have chosen “sacred/holy” to convey this particularly Buddhist sense.

combine to create potency.<sup>7</sup> Like an electrical power circuit, this current of potency is constantly pulsating throughout the space, amplified at certain nodes while veneration or ritual affords them particular attention, but always connected to and supported by nodes that are not being directly engaged. This circuit creates the network that gives the space and particular objects within it the capacity to influence the thoughts and actions of those who engage it. This inherent circuitry of a Thai monastery imbues it with great potential to affect change within individuals and throughout the community and gives certain objects and people both the authority and agency to act in the world.

Potency functions in a similar way to the “power” described by Nicola Tannenbaum in her analysis of Shan practices and worldview.<sup>8</sup> She writes, “Power is a basic, unquestioned part of the universe. It simply exists. It is not equally distributed throughout the universe; some beings have great power, others have little. Power is morally neutral. It is inherently neither good nor bad. Beings who have power decide how they will use it. All beings in the universe are ranked in terms of relative power.” Additionally, power can be lost and gained, as well as shared by giving protection, which in turn gives the followers power. In her power-protection model, power is something beings throughout the universe have either through exercising restraint and keeping precepts, by simply having it innately, or by being parents and ancestors.<sup>9</sup> I expand this notion of power from that which only beings can possess in order to bestow protection, to objects as well — it is taken as a basic given for the functioning of the universe and some have more

---

<sup>7</sup> I have selected these components since they were the most commonly invoked during conversations with visitors to Wat Phra That. However, they should not be considered exhaustive.

<sup>8</sup> See Anderson (1972). Tannenbaum implicitly benefits from Benedict Anderson’s famous conception of power, which he set forth in “The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture.” This notion of power, he argued, was inherent in “traditional Javanese culture” and provided “a systematic and logical explanation” of Javanese political theory and behavior. In contrast to Western notions of power, it was “concrete, homogeneous, constant in total quantity, and without inherent moral implications as such” (Anderson 1972: 18-23).

<sup>9</sup> Tannenbaum 1995: 75-79

than others. Just as a being can exercise their power for beneficence or maleficence, so too can an object. Moreover, powerful objects better protect and aid those that maintain an extended relationship with them, although it is possible for an object to provide assistance outside of an enduring relationship. For example, during a singular visit to Wat Phra That one may seek luck in the lottery by propitiating the relic, and it may be granted. However, the chance of one's request being fulfilled increases with their individual efforts and ongoing devotion to a particular object or image.

Here, I will briefly highlight some key components of potency. Perhaps the most widely ascribed of these is *saksit*, sacred or holy, as almost everything within a monastic space can potentially be *saksit* (trees, monks, statues, monastic building materials, *chedi*, *items* within the museum collection, *stūpas*, etc.).<sup>10</sup> Endowed with *saksit* a being, person, or thing is typically able to affect the world both positively (i.e., cause success, improve health, provide protection, etc.) and directly inflict suffering via a supramundane capacity.<sup>11</sup> Some believe that things possess *saksit* in varying degrees (e.g., the relic has more than the other objects), and can therefore gain or loss it in varying degrees. Others, however, believe that a thing either possesses *saksit* or it does not. In any case, since most *saksit* objects can provide assistance and grant boons, as well as inflict harm (including death), they are therefore worthy of respect and/or propitiation. Additionally, *saksit* can be obtained by, for example, something's ability to stand the test of time (e.g., most anything old (*boran*) connected to Buddhism or local religious history), through blessings, physical connection to another *saksit* object (e.g., a clipping of *bodhi* tree from

---

<sup>10</sup> *Sing saksit* is a thing that possesses *saksit*, and the noun, sacredness, is *kwam saksit*.

<sup>11</sup> Erick White describes how various beings in the pantheon can possess “*saksit* potency” or “a derivative of any supramundane status, which is potentially benevolent and protective although not necessarily so, and which is typically accessed through a cultural logic of supplication, paying respect, propitiation and vow-making.” He further describes how beings and people can gain more potency in the form of *abhinihan*, “meritorious, magisterial authority” (White 2014: 301).

Bodhgaya), auspicious birth, ordination, righteous living, connection to a town's history, or by being fashioned in the likeness of another *saksit* object.<sup>12</sup> Because of this broad definition, objects described as *saksit* may or may not be consecrated or venerated (e.g., stones with ancient inscriptions on them are *saksit*, but not necessarily venerated in hopes of future action).<sup>13</sup>

A second key attribute associated with potency is *sirimongkhon*, auspiciousness or a high degree of moral virtue. Although often equated with the moral righteousness aspect of *saksit*, auspiciousness is actually a subset of *saksit* as this adjective is applied more selectively. For example, the relic is *sirimongkhon*, as are some larger, more popular or famous images, but smaller, ignored objects may not be. Also, *sirimongkhon* is ascribed to those who lead or are born into an especially auspicious life, like venerated monks and members of the royal family.

When something has *itthiphon nai jai*, it is able to positively influence one's thoughts and dispositions. Many people experience calm and joy just by entering the monastic grounds, and indeed this experience of mental quiet, happiness, and satisfaction is often the reason people give for visiting a monastery (i.e., simply by entering into the field of the nodal network, one's mental dispositions are immediately affected). One university student told me that whenever she is feeling a little down or under the weather she comes to *wai*<sup>14</sup> the relic and immediately feels better afterwards. Thus, the ability to influence one's mental and emotional state is fundamental

---

<sup>12</sup> I spoke with a spirit medium, who said she comes to the monastery because the entire area is *saksit* (*boriwen saksit*). There *saksit* gods enter her body, and then she becomes *saksit*, and so is able to see the future, give advice, and diagnose disease, illness, or other bodily problems that cannot be seen with the naked eye.

<sup>13</sup> One informant told me that a common misunderstanding is that things are *saksit*, when in reality it is the duty of the devout Buddhist to practice *khwaam saksit* (sacredness), which is what the Buddha taught (i.e., the *dhamma* is *saksit*). Thus, *saksit* is not to be believed in, but practiced by following the "rules of *dhamma*" (*sin tham*), which are needed to keep humans' animal instincts in check. This is the only time I heard *saksit* explicitly explained like this. In any case, the pervasiveness and complexity of the concept certainly allows for many individual interpretations, which can then be translated into various practices.

<sup>14</sup> A referential gesture formed by placing one's palms together, raising them toward the face, and bowing the head.

in the underlying potency of the nodal network.<sup>15</sup> The corollary to *itthiphon nai jai* is simply *itthiphon* or influence; *itthiphon* allows something or someone enact real world change for the benefit of others.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, *amnat* is typically glossed as “power” or “authority.” Something or someone with *amnat* may affect one’s mind and heart (*amnat nai jai*), but can also act more outwardly in the world (e.g., a Prime Minister exercising power over a population through his status and position). Additionally, *amnat* can be utilized for righteous or unwholesome ends, as this power is understood quite broadly. For a potent object, the characteristic of *amnat* means it is respected and most likely venerated, because it can affect real change in the world. The Buddha relic has the most *amnat*.

This multifaceted complex of characteristics is at the root of how an object can act in the world to imbue objects with potency and potentiality, and connect them within and to the space. They are not mutually exclusive, and devotees apply them differently (e.g., some see objects in the museum as sacred but lacking influence since they are not propitiated regularly). Since it is devotees who preserve this network, its potency remains accessible to them.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> See Cassaniti (2015) for a detailed analysis of how these emotions are experienced by those visiting a monastery.

<sup>16</sup> There is a negative and sometimes violent aspect to *itthiphon*, but more often when speaking of people rather than objects. In this case, a man (*phu mi itthiphon*) uses violent or strong-arm tactics for their personal gain. I have also been told that they may be prone to physical fighting. Because of this negative connotation, some of my respondents were emphatic that no *saksit* object could also possess *itthiphon*. Nonetheless, they agreed it did have *itthiphon nai jai*.

<sup>17</sup> I spoke with a few Muslims, who also view the space as quite powerful and important, although they acknowledge the ultimate virtue in the creation is from Allah; it was Allah who created the Buddha, someone who can be admired although not venerated, and everything within the beautiful monastic complex. Nonetheless, I was told that when entering the space, they too feel calm and joy, as well as admiration and respect.

## The Nodal Network

Based on my ethnographic findings, I posit that Wat Phra That's various buildings, objects, images,<sup>18</sup> and the Buddha relic each contribute to a complex material nodal network, which facilitates the pulsation and permeation of potency and potentiality throughout the monastic space.<sup>19</sup> This theoretical understanding allows us to view individual materials as dynamic, active agents that mediate various beings, produce emotional and physical reactions, and inspire action. Moreover, the nodal network theory highlights the relationships created in a space, thereby allowing insights into the dynamics of lived practice to be revealed. Here, I am following Tannenbaum's method of ethnographic study to extrapolate an "assumption or underlying conceptual organization" from my informants' statements and actions.<sup>20</sup> That is, the idea of this complex nodal network is not one explicitly expressed by those I spoke with, and yet with this notion we can begin to see how particular actions make sense. I posit that it is in this material network, rather than in just one image or a single Buddha relic, that the immaterial network of potency is created, sustained, and challenged at Wat Phra That. This intertwinement between objects and immaterial forces creates an entire potent space that practitioners can utilize in various ways. Further, by thinking in terms of networks, we move beyond the idea that people and objects can only be conceived of as autonomous and bounded; instead, we see how they are complex and distributed, and realize that more interdependent forms of existence are the hallmark of social spaces, which are filled with materials that help craft and are crafted by these

---

<sup>18</sup> By "image" I mean any material object that has the form that is distinctly human, animal, deity, etc. (e.g., images of the Buddha, monks, Mae Thorani, kings, mythological creatures, etc.). By "object," I mean any material object without distinctly anthropomorphic or animalistic features (e.g., a *chedi*, trees, pieces of cloth, amulets, etc.). To avoid redundancy, at times I will make reference to a general category of "objects;" this includes images and all other materials.

<sup>19</sup> Bauista references "spiritual potency" that emanates into surrounding spaces from objects or images that "motivate the energies of the deities and spirits around them." This potency can also inspire people or collective bodies to action (e.g., one going into a trance or a group taking religious pilgrimage) (Bauista 2012: vii).

<sup>20</sup> Tannenbaum 1995: 13

practices and dynamic identities. Functioning within networks of religiosity, individuals and objects mutually strengthen and reinforce other practitioners (ascetics and laity), materials, and the Buddhist *sāsana* itself (i.e., the “dispensation” of the Buddha, including the teachings, practices, and community of practitioners). Not all parts of this network can contribute equally, but they all contribute — a monk cannot exist without the surrounding society providing food, shelter and other necessities, and likewise, a relic, or any other Buddhist material object for that matter, cannot meaningfully exist without practitioners.

The relic is the nexus, while other objects within and persons moving throughout the space are supplemental nodes. This expansive network blanketing the space is created through a mutual reinforcement between the nexus and every node, and can be tapped by devotees to affect particular, desired outcomes. In a sense, the monastic space is electrified by the connections between various items, the relationships devotees forge with objects, and the concerted efforts of practitioners towards various ends. Since it functions as a network, there is no single origin of this potency and it cannot be traced back to any one agent. And while the Buddha relic is the epicenter of the potency at Wat Phra That, and relic veneration offers a good paradigm for Buddhist propitiation, we must simultaneously realize that the entombed tooth is but one component in an elaborate space. Within the walls of Wat Phra That one finds a veritable treasure trove of objects that all function as supplemental nodes of Buddhist potency and potentiality — the central *chedi*, covered in hundred of pounds of gold, the inner courtyard packed with smaller *stūpas*, the gallery of nearly two hundred Buddha statues, a pagoda base replete with numerous statues of Buddhas, famous monks, gongs, and highly ornamented chairs that were previously used for giving sermons, the incredibly elaborate relic chamber, a replica of the Buddha’s footprint in its own quaint building, a Bodhi tree grown from a clipping of a tree in

Sri Lanka, shrines dedicated to local heroes of legend, chanting and ordination halls (the largest in the south of Thailand), a large room filled with expensive gifts given to the monastery, and much more. Monks, manuscripts, amulets, *mae chi*, and ordinary practitioners can all be supplementary nodes, as well.

As is the case at other Thai monasteries, an individual image is “made more ritually powerful when situated among other images from which it draws concomitant associative power [ . . . ] These images exist in mutually empowering relationships with other images. The greater the number of images there are, the greater the ritual and votive attention.”<sup>21</sup> At Wat Phra That, the Buddha relic, the nexus, provides an immense source of ritually efficacious potency, which infuses the surrounding nodes in the network, and is in turn, enhanced by them as they too emit this potency.<sup>22</sup> The Buddha’s tooth is hidden from sight within the golden *chedi*, and unlike other Buddha relics in Thailand and throughout the globe, it is never displayed, bathed, or paraded.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, its previous bodily connection to the Buddha as well as its embeddedness within the Nakhon locale causes it to function as the nexus of Buddhist potency, making it a particularly efficacious point of access to the network, especially for visitors who may have not developed a personal relationship with another object.

Each node within this complex network is not equally potent; certain images, monks, and objects are more or less powerful based on their relationships with other people and objects, a reputation based on previous success stories, or particularly for Buddhist ascetics, their meditative or magical achievements. This power may be inherent in the object or image due to

---

<sup>21</sup> McDaniel 2011b: 249-250

<sup>22</sup> Since most monasteries do not have a relic of the Buddha, another image, *chedi*, or charismatic monk, may serve as the nexus. However, it should be noted that not all Thai Buddhist monasteries necessarily have a nexus and a nodal network functions the same without one.

<sup>23</sup> In Bangkok, this is done at Wat Nang Chi. In Chiang Mai Province at Wat Chom Thong the *dakkhinamoli* relic is bathed and paraded at the beginning and end of each rains retreat (Skilling 2005: 281).

its innate characteristics (e.g., previous bodily connection to the Buddha or likeness to another famous image), but is displayed through actively assisting people (e.g., granting boons, aiding in meditative practice, channeling spirits, etc.) and the degree of efficaciousness in supporting the monastery (e.g., attracting devotees from near and far who make offerings or donate monetarily, by creating a calming space, etc.). As the nexus, the relic is the most potent, and its potency radiates outward, infusing nearby items and people. In a quite literal example, it is said that the golden, bejeweled cup (*phum khao bin*) atop the *chedi*'s spire collects rainwater, morning dew, and simultaneously the potency of the relic, which then evaporates and auspiciously spreads over and throughout the entire city.<sup>24</sup> In this instance and the following example, the potency collected in material objects at the monastery extends beyond its walls. Wat Phra That is famous for its cloth-wrapping ceremony (*hae pha khuen that*). I will only briefly discuss the ceremony here, as we will return to it in more detail in Chapter Five. During Makhabucha and Viskabucha days, thousands of practitioners carry a long, yellow or orange cloth over their heads as they ascend and circumambulate the central *chedi*, wrapping it with the cloth. This is also done around the lower base of *chedi* in its gallery and around the smaller *stūpas* in the courtyard. While the Buddhist holidays mentioned above draw the largest crowds, this cloth-wrapping can be done daily by any visitor or group who wishes to participate. Additionally, devotees often write wishes or blessings for others on the cloth. After the ceremonies are over, the cloth is gathered and bundled. Since throwing away a devotional object would be improper, the cloth is distributed to

---

<sup>24</sup> The monastic brochure in English explains that the center of the ornament is “a small golden pot which collects rain water and let (sic) the water evaporates (sic) back to spread the holiness around.” The Thai notes that the “collected water is sprinkled all over,” but does not reference the so-called spreading of holiness. Instead the Thai brochure focuses on the details of the construction of the ornament. For example, the fact that its cage has four main pillars representing the Four Paths and Four Fruits of the Buddhist Way (this detail and explanation is not included in the English version).

other local monasteries to be used as decoration. In this way, the most influential monastery in the region is able to distribute its potency beyond its walls.



**Image 3.1:** Used and bundled donative cloth on which devotees wrote wishes and blessings (photo by author)

Nodes also emit potency but to a lesser degree than the relic. However, since the nexus and nodes mutually reinforce each other and function together in the network, a nodes capacity to assist practitioners can be equal to than that of the relic. Therefore, even though the nexus emits the most potency as such, for an individual, any node may come to be the most efficacious for their particular needs. This is especially true as a meaningful, reciprocal relationship is developed through repeated propitiation over time. As these nodes provide key points of access to Buddhist power, one's proximity to them increases this potentiality; the nearer one is to the nexus or a node, the easier it is to access its potency and so too that of the network. Likewise, the more intimate, effortful, and personal a relationship one has with the nexus or a node, the greater the potential for them to reap benefits; just as a chief disciple gleans more from their teacher than a distant student, so too does a devotee reap the rewards of a deep, sustained relationship with an

image. Finally, through devotional action practitioners cultivate wholesome mentalities and righteous practices. In doing so, they preserve the Buddhist teachings (*dhamma*) and tradition (*sāsana*), as they reinvest in and bolster the network.

It is the case that certain nodes offer greater ease and efficaciousness in assisting with the production of specific, desired ends. For example, the image of Phra Kacchayana continues to increase in popularity (and so, potency) as word spreads of his ability to end infertility;<sup>25</sup> his shrine flanking the principal *chedi* is replete with both a display case and boxes of albums full of photos of infants, including many of twins and triplets (a true testament to his immense power!), whose births are wholly credited to the intervention of the golden, round-bellied image. This image is also well known for its ability help cure backaches or other spinal problems, and so inside the small building housing the image (*wihan phra kacchayana*), there is a basket of wooden walking sticks that can be offered to the image by those who have had or seek to have their ailments cured. This image's ability to resolve the suffering or bodily discomfort of others is comports with the idea that this disciple of the Buddha was able to distort his own body from its original handsome appearance to one of unsightly, hunchbacked abnormality (i.e., it possesses the innate ability to alter bodily conditions).

---

<sup>25</sup> Lagirarde (2003) does not discuss this image's ability to cure infertility, but does say it is supposed to be able to bring rain. Those I spoke with did not mention this rain-bringing ability.



**Images 3.2 and 3.3:** Phra Kacchayana Shrine (left) and photos of infants in the *wihan phra kacchayana* (right) (photos by author)

In sum, material nodes are physical harbingers of the immaterial, Buddhist potency that remains in the world, and since they are joined in a collective network, their potential to act efficaciously is vast. Moreover, it is the attention paid to particular nodes that allows them to become more potent; for some, there is almost unlimited potential. To be sure, a relic of the Buddha automatically increases the potency-store and potential of surrounding objects. Nonetheless, the entire relational network is sustained by devotees, who through their actions reaffirm this immaterial force, contribute to the network, and benefit from the agency of the objects within it.

### **Object Agency and the Study of Religious Materials**

Alfred Gell has famously set forth the argument that objects function around an art nexus and through this dynamic acquire agency. Gell emphasizes the relational dynamics surrounding

“indexes” (objects) that produce effects as they are embedded in cultural and social networks. Indexes function in relation to artist(s), “patients” (recipients/viewers/devotees of objects and art), and the “prototype” (what is represented or from where inspiration was drawn for the object or art). These four components comprise the “art nexus.” Gell posits that it is through this dynamic that objects acquire agency. In other words, he seeks to answer the question, how can inanimate materials come to be thought of as acting in the world? It is to this that we now turn.

Overall, Gell argues that objects act within and on social relations, based on expectations, assumptions, and understandings about how the world works.<sup>26</sup> On the one hand, for Gell it is paramount that the index (material thing) permits the “abduction of agency,” or more specifically, the abduction of social agency.<sup>27</sup> The logical process of abduction is, simply, applying a general principal derived from a limited number of observations to a specific situation. For example, if one observes a pale, indented band encircling the ring finger of a man who is uncharacteristically sullen, it may be abducted that the person has removed their wedding ring because they are going through a divorce. This is not necessarily the case, but a few observations have been applied to a specific situation to draw a conclusion and impute causation,

---

<sup>26</sup> Gell 1992: 43

<sup>27</sup> To move away from art historical or aesthetic approaches, Gell defines “art objects” as things that “fascinate, compel, and entrap” with “their peculiarity, intransigence, and oddness” and “are difficult to make, difficult to ‘think,’ difficult to transact” (ibid.: 23). The definition of an art object is theoretical in that it is “whatever is inserted into the ‘slot’ provided for art objects in the system of terms and relations envisaged in the theory [...] Nothing is decidable in advance about the nature of this object, because the theory is premised on the idea that the nature of the art object is a function of the social-relational matrix in which it is embedded.” Gell writes, “anything whatsoever could, conceivably, be an art object from the anthropological point of view,” since anthropology is concerned with social relations, and for our purposes, how objects mediate agency within and through these social dynamics (ibid.: 7). Art objects (whether they be a masterful painting to a chipped rock placed on a mantel) captivate, fascinate, confuse, display technical expertise, and inspire introspection, for example. However, while Gell says “anything whatsoever,” in fact he limits art objects to things that are made. So, he introduces concept of the “index,” which is any material object that is the “outcome, and/or the instrument of, social agency.” The index allows for a broader range of objects to be examined, to move away from common associations with “high art,” and to see how objects (perhaps those we would not expect) act in accordance with the particular cultural circumstances in which they are found. As such, all “art objects” are “indexes,” but the reverse is not true. Gell also mentions the peculiarity of indexes with miraculous origins, which are notable because “their power rests on the fact that their origin is inexplicable except as a magical, supernatural, occurrence” (ibid.: 68).

which may or may not be the case. For Gell's purposes, when an object/index is understood to initiate a causal sequence, the patient/recipient/viewer is logically applying the general rule or assumption that social others intentionally act to a specific object using the principle of abduction; they impart the index with agency. Gell provides the example of someone kissing the feet of a statue of the Virgin Mary in the hopes of being cured of their illness. Here, "the primary means through which the index affects the recipient is by subverting the recipient's *sense of self-possession* in some way . . ." That is, the recipient is affected by the feeling that they have taken on a characteristic, the "inherent agency," of the index. Regardless of what is believed, Mary, the assumed resident of the statue, is not what is affecting change in the devotee, but rather this is the process of abduction.<sup>28</sup> In another example, after suffering an injury, one may abduct agency to a statue they ignored or mistreated as the cause of the injury; like when dealing with other social beings, one may experience negative repercussions if they act inappropriately in the relationship. This type of abduction is not confined to only religious objects, however, as people often abduct agency to mundane indexes as well (e.g., young children do this with dolls, and adults may do this with their car, which they smite for betraying them when the transmission falls onto the freeway far from home). In short, people often apply the same referential meanings to objects as they do to social others, thus granting them agency.<sup>29</sup>

Agency itself, then, is present whenever an event occurring within "culturally prescribed frameworks" is said to happen because of the intention of a person or thing that "initiates a causal sequence." Gell writes, "An agent is one who 'causes events to happen' in their vicinity.

---

<sup>28</sup> Gell 1992: 31-32

<sup>29</sup> Artists, by abduction, are also assigned responsibility for the existence of the index, and prototypes, by abduction, are thought to be represented via the index.

As a result of this exercise of agency, certain events transpire.”<sup>30</sup> All that is required for agency is that it is “attributable to those persons (and things...) who/which are seen as initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by the mind or will or intention, rather than mere concatenation of physical events.” In other words, people or things with agency initiate events that are unexplainable by “physical laws of the cosmos.” This definition of agency relies on culturally specific processes of agency abduction, which help determine what actions are appropriately attributable to objects.

Let’s imagine a scenario where a mango falls towards the ground and hits someone on the head. One explanation is that gravity, a physical property, caused that event (no agency; gravitational physics). Another explanation is that one promised before an object at a monastery to fulfill their end of a pact if they received some assistance. Once their request was fulfilled, they failed to follow through on their end of the bargain, and consequently, retribution is delivered, caused by the spirit embodying the object (spirit agency made possible because of an object’s intermediary role). This same scenario, where a promise in a pact is disregarded, could be the explanation for the potency of an object itself to enact suffering (object agency without an inhabiting spirit). Yet another explanation is that gravity may have caused the mango to fall, but it did so at that specific moment because a negative act committed in a previous lifetime necessitated future pain and displeasure, which came to fruition with a knock on the head (no agency; kammic machination in the functioning of the cosmos). A different line of reasoning suggests that since a protective amulet was taken off earlier that morning, one was more vulnerable to harm (lack of physical object means it could not protect). If the mango fell and nearly missed the unsuspecting person below, this could be explained variously: gravity, a spirit

---

<sup>30</sup> Gell 1992: 16-17

intervened to protect, there was no kammic necessity for suffering, and if the protective amulet had not been removed, an object intervened for protection. All of these explanations are equally as valid, depending on who is making the determination. In this way, the determination of agency itself is dependent on a patient and their worldview, and so is wholly relational as those around an object have the potential to make it a social agent.<sup>31</sup> As such, objects must be understood via the receptions they receive, which are likely to be diverse, and the contexts and worldviews in which they operate.<sup>32</sup> In sum, whether an animate or inanimate object can function as a social agent is dependent not on its biological attributes, but rather on its position within a “network of social relations” and the reception it receives.<sup>33</sup> As we have seen, Gell argues that indexes acquire social agency because they causally affect the state of mind of patients, who in turn abduct that the object has acted. When we recognize both people and objects as complex networks in and of themselves, and then position them within larger social and material networks, we allow for the possibility of these networks interacting in unexpected ways.

The above example of a mango falling is helpful in illustrating how the line between the so-called independent state of the physical universe (“mere concatenation of physical events”) and agency/intentionality can be blurred based on context. The nodal network itself, although not necessarily an explicit part of one’s worldview, contributes to the underlying functioning of

---

<sup>31</sup> A fun, poignant, and recent example of people imparting agency to an object occurred in town near Oakland, California. A resident and his wife were fed up with the open space across from their home being used as a garbage dump and site of drug dealing, prostitution, and other seeding behavior. After much deliberation, they came up with the idea to place a concrete Buddha statue, purchased at Home Depot, in the open space. They considered the Buddha to be the least controversial religious figure available, and so decided on him. Shortly thereafter, people painted the statue and eventually a pavilion was built to house him. The Vietnamese community continued to take great interest in the figure and began caring for it and venerating it. People now regularly visit it, and particularly on feast days, devotees come from far and wide to propitiate the image. The Buddha statue was widely successful at deterring garbage dumping and crime, and perhaps even more so at creating a new place of veneration and communal gatherings (Alexander (2015)).

<sup>32</sup> Gell 1992: 22-24

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*: 123

the monastic space and so exists as a matter of the presumed way the cosmos works — objects do work, they function in relation to each other, and through them results occur. At the same time, however, the network is dependent on recipients/devotees (unlike gravity, for example) as objects are either inherently potent or they mediate encounters with the beings that reside in them. Thus, the treatment of objects is crucial to the relationship with a devotee; if not venerated or placated via the objects in which they reside, certain beings can wreak havoc in the lives of those around them. When cared for properly, boons can be granted as reciprocity is developed. Since this is a social relationship, certain aspects are more generalized (e.g., the offering of flowers, incense, and a candle) while others are more specific to the relationship (e.g., giving a spirit its favorite color Fanta soda, or offering the Thaksin image a rooster figurine, since that was the king’s favorite animal). People become the Buddhists they are because of the objects they interact with, and Buddhist sites are only such because of the materials that comprise and fill them. This is how the universe functions. As such, the nodal network resides in a conceptual space between the independent state of the cosmos and the agency of devotees and objects, being an integral part of the former and dependent on the latter. The cosmos functions how it does precisely because people interact with objects. I would suggest that *kamma* (Sanskrit: *karma*) functions in a similar way — it is simply a function of the cosmos, while at the same time allowing for human and object intervention that introduces a measure of control in the grey space between the physical machinations of the cosmos and that which is the result of intentional agency (by the object or devotee).

Justin McDaniel has highlighted some of the ways Gell’s art nexus model can be adjusted in order to be more applicable in the study of objects in Thai monasteries. Namely: the artist of particular images or objects is most often not known, identified, or acknowledged; the “index” is

in a perpetual state of change as devotees add directly to or around the piece (e.g., with bits of gold leaf or burning incense); the “prototype” inhabits the image rather than merely inspiring it; and, the recipient is always changing as these images are engaged by wide range of the populous and not merely museum curators, donors, or tour guides, for example. Gell does not, as McDaniel successfully argues with a case study of two images at Wat Mahabut in Bangkok, account for the relationships that images have with each other.<sup>34</sup> I am expanding on the ideas of both Gell and McDaniel in positing a material nodal network, which is comprised of a variety of relationships between objects themselves and those who propitiate them. As Miller writes, “what matters may not be the entities themselves, human or otherwise, but rather the networks of agents and relationships between them.”<sup>35</sup> This is what we see at a Thai Buddhist monastery; it is only through the widespread materiality that the immaterial potency can exist, and so we must look equally to both for an understanding of how the monastery functions. It is imperative, however, that these materials are not merely taken as evidence for, or inferior to, the immaterial to which they are intimately connected.<sup>36</sup> Instead, they must be treated as essential agents in their

---

<sup>34</sup> McDaniel 2011: 248-249

<sup>35</sup> Miller 2005: 11. Miller draws from Gell’s idea that we must look “through objects to the embedded agency we infer they contain,” as well as from Bruno Latour’s general proposition that we must look beyond humans for agency. “Agency” in Miller’s sense is not equal to personhood, as he advocates for the breakdown of the dualism inherent in the subject/object distinction. Rather, he offers “a refutation of an aesthetic theory of art, which is replaced by a theory of the effects that art has achieved as the distributed agency of some subjects upon other subjects” (ibid.: 12-13). Gell considers “‘persons’ not as bounded biological organisms, but use this label to apply to all the objects and/or events in the milieu from which agency or personhood can be abducted.” This means understanding a person as the collection of their work/indexes as distributed over time and space. He writes, “a person and a person’s mind are not confined to particular spatio-temporal coordinates, but consist of a spread of biographical events and memories of events, and a dispersed category of material objects, traces, and leavings, which can be attributed to a person and which, in aggregate, testify to agency and patienthood during a biographical career which may, indeed, prolong itself after biological death” (Gell 1998: 222).

<sup>36</sup> Webb Keane aptly states, “Religions may not always demand beliefs, but they always involve material forms. It is in materiality that they are part of experience and provoke responses, that they have public lives and enter into ongoing chains of causes and consequences.” Here Keane is discussing, in contrast to internal beliefs, what he considers all external materiality, including semiotic forms (e.g., oral utterance, liturgy, testimony), objects (e.g., alters, buildings, offerings), and external displays and practices. These material forms change in particular historical and social contexts. Thus, he argues scholars should not “try to eliminate the materiality of religion by treating it as, above all, evidence for something immaterial, such as beliefs or prior experiences” since that “risks denying the very

own right (i.e., networks in and of themselves). Yet, as complex agents they act in a variety of ways, including facilitating potency and/or beings through their involvement in the nodal network.

At Wat Phra That, the agency of the relic becomes even more interesting when we remember it is never visible. For Gell, indexes are “real, physical things, unique and identifiable”<sup>37</sup> and the act of seeing of an index is paramount as it initiates the process of abduction, since when an object is seen, the agency of its maker and/or whomever is imagined to use it are indexed.<sup>38</sup> He writes, “A basic constraint on the theory being developed here is that unless there is an *index*, there can be no abduction of agency, and since the topic of this theoretical enterprise is precisely the abduction of agency from indexes, the index has to be present for analysis to proceed.”<sup>39</sup> And yet, the relic — forever concealed but always imagined to be present — is indeed a material index that quite readily acquires social agency. Here, we have a remarkable instance of an invisible index functioning as the center of the nodal network, and inspiring an incredible amount of devotion and wide-ranging affective experiences by those who presume its existence. The stability and assuredness of this imagined index’s existence and potency is confirmed in narrative and material constructions and continually reaffirmed in

---

conditions of sociality, and even time itself” (Keane 2008: S124). What I am arguing is not a prioritization of either immateriality or materiality, but rather the necessity to understand the dynamics at play between both (i.e., the networks created). Additionally, I use materiality in a more narrow sense than Keane in that I am including only actual materials (e.g., objects, images, buildings, etc.) rather than also including semiotic utterances and external performances. I do, however, include people as materials in the nodal network.

<sup>37</sup> Gell 1998: 13

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*: 16

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*: 36; Here, one may ask whether the principal *chedi* or some other visible object in the relic chamber is the actual index. However, people are not venerating the *chedi*, even though they may be venerating *in* and *at* it. Likewise the surrounding objects are considered supplemental to the relic of the Buddha (e.g., protecting it). All these objects may be revered but when one is supplicating the relic, it is to the invisible object to which their mind’s eye turns.

contemporary practice.<sup>40</sup> That is, the art nexus functions (i.e., the relic/index is attributed great agency within the nodal network and the devotee/patient is causally affected) with a hidden Buddha relic because of its perceived place within the dynamics of the monastery, town, and those who propitiate it.<sup>41</sup>

Visiting monasteries full of things enables devotion, which shapes identities and places within families and communities. Regardless of all the talk in Buddhism about the impermanence of things and the importance of non-attachment, without the objects that proliferate the space, the monastery could not be what it is and the Buddhist could not be who they are without them. Moreover, immaterial potency is integrally intertwined with the physical objects that comprise the space and those who utilize it. In sum, the nodal network is connected via material nodes that function as points of access to the immaterial potency that pulses into and outward from these objects, and so throughout the monastery.

### **How Important is the Buddha to His Relics?**

At Wat Phra That, although venerating a “relic of the Buddha” (*phra borom saririkkathat*) named the “crystal eyetooth relic” (*phra that khiao kaeo*),<sup>42</sup> there is debate as to which specific relic is contained with the *chedi*. While the majority of respondents thought it was

---

<sup>40</sup> Gell discusses “imaginary image-making” but in a way wholly different from how I am here. For him, “imaginary image-making” is when the artist is the “imager of the appearances of things” and so artistic agency produces something wholly imagined and fictional. This is in contrast to “received images,” which are images that have been previously imagined (e.g., unicorns) and different artists add to them (Gell 1998: 38-39). It is reasonable to ask if there are any truly, pure imagined images or if all are derived from some previous image. This is well beyond our scope here, however.

<sup>41</sup> If we discount the materiality of the relic because it cannot be seen, we are left with the idea that the relic is either not a material object capable of agency (i.e., an index), it is something else entirely capable of agency (what this “something else” would be is unclear), or it is not capable of agency at all. In any case, through an examination of the dynamics of the monastery, we know it actively functions in the nodal network and so the lives of practitioners.

<sup>42</sup> Relics of the Buddha are called *phra borom saririkkathat*, which are not to be confused with the relics (*phra that*) of other famous monks who are thought to have attained enlightenment.

a piece of bone or tooth, a few believed it to be the whole eyetooth, while others knew only that it was some type of Buddha relic. Indeed, one of the most miraculous characteristics of a Buddha relic is its capacity for infinite duplication, which makes tracking specific relics notoriously difficult.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, duplicates (in the case of certain images) or fragments of revered objects with demonstrated potency travelling vast distances are a way networks of Buddhist potency are expanded. One elderly merchant, who has operated a stand in the monastery's market for many years, chuckled with a wide grin when I asked her which Buddha relic it was exactly that Wat Phra That laid claim to. "It's very old, many thousands of years old," she said pointing in the direction of central *chedi* and rhetorically asking, "Who knows which one it is?" Likewise, when speaking to a monk who often staffs a table in the relic chamber about relics in general, he took out his computer and showed me a YouTube video explaining never ending replication of relics. He emphasized that now there are far more Buddha relics than could ever be accounted for. This same monk has given me lengthy narratives that parallel the town's chronicles regarding the arrival of the relic to Nakhon, and so he is well versed in the town's historiography. And yet, he still emphasized that specifics regarding the relic were largely irrelevant. What these responses indicate is that whether the Buddha relic is thought to be a piece of bone, part of a tooth, the whole tooth, or even a miraculous duplicate of unknown origin, makes little difference to many devotees. What mattered was that Wat Phra That's golden *chedi* housed something that was once physically a part of the Buddha, and thus regardless of history or description, was an incredibly important relic of the Buddha. Moreover, the fact that the Buddha relic is contained within the very old, auspicious, principal *chedi* in and of itself bolsters its import, as old age and large size

---

<sup>43</sup> A single monastery in northern Thailand, Wat Chom Ping, claims to house over 50,000 relics of the Buddha (Strong 2007: xiv).

are also indicative of power.<sup>44</sup> We can bear the previous bodily connection to the historical Buddha in mind, but then so as to not over prioritize that connection, we must further account for the relational and situational dynamics, the networks, in which the relic is located. In doing so, we continue to see how a complex space is created which enables objects to do actual work.

Many scholarly debates about relics of the Buddha have centered on how the Buddha's presence can be instantiated through relics given his physical and temporal absence.<sup>45</sup> After the Buddha's death, debates focused not on the whether the *dhamma* (the Buddha's teachings) would be the Buddha's successor but on how — would it be only via the teachings, or would it be in bodily relics (Pali: *dhātu* and *sarīra*) or via other materials.<sup>46</sup> It has, indeed, turned out to be both; the cremation of his body (attested to in the well-known *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*<sup>47</sup>) produced relics,<sup>48</sup> which have in turn, been of perennial interest to Buddhologists. Some scholastic arguments reason that the Buddha is somehow made present in the here and now via his relics, even though he is physically, spatially, and temporally absent. Alternatively, the relic is posited as no more than a material signifier of a being who lived and died long ago.<sup>49</sup> In his study of Buddhism in Burma, Melford Spiro describes the relationship between a *chedi* and a

---

<sup>44</sup> This is referred to as “monumentality,” the idea that a thing's large size is a source of power. In other words, for some things, the more matter a material object is comprised of, the more power it possesses (Miller 2005: 16). This is not the case for all objects, of course. For example, although never seen, the relic is assumed to be quite small. The famous Emerald Buddha, over which wars have been waged, is also quite small.

<sup>45</sup> Since in this chapter we are dealing with a bodily relic of the Buddha, his left eyetooth, we need not embark into discussions of the other types of Buddhist relics (e.g., the Buddha's bowl, fingernails, robes, hair, footprints, Bodhi tree clippings, etc.). See Strong (2004) for a thorough account of the various types of relics and their accompanying narratives.

<sup>46</sup> Swearer 2004b: 145

<sup>47</sup> In the final verses of the *Sutta*, the list of the four tooth relics of the Buddha appears with a recommendation: “For thus the relics of the All-Seeing One are best honored by those who are worthy of honor – by gods and Nagas and lords of men, yea, by the highest mankind. Pay homage with clasped hands! For hard indeed it is through hundreds of ages to meet with an All-Enlightened One!” (Story and Vajira (1998))

<sup>48</sup> Strong reads the *Sutta* in such a way that the Buddha's bodily relics are “not just a by-product of the Buddha's cremation and funeral, they are the whole point of it” (Strong 2004: 23).

<sup>49</sup> See Strong 2004: 2-5 for a summary of these arguments, and the influence of Protestant Christianity on their formulation.

relic of the Buddha, and so provides a classic example of this type of presence and absence language. He writes, “Hence, the religious rather than social motive for pagoda worship is fairly clear: since there is a relic of the Buddha, He Himself is *present* there in more than a symbolic sense. This is why the Buddhist does not worship at the pagoda; rather, he worships the pagoda. It is not only a memorial to the Buddha but in some important sense *an embodiment of Him*. This accounts in part for the reverence with which it is treated, and the enormous wealth lavished upon it.”<sup>50</sup> Forty years after Spiro’s seminal study, we see this same language used in the *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*’s entry for “Relics of the Buddha,” written by Peter Harvey. “Buddha-relics,” he writes, “can be seen to remind devotees of the impermanence of the Buddha and of his entry to the deathless (*nirvāṇa*): they are a *presence* that reminds them of the *absent* Buddha.”<sup>51</sup>

I argue, however, that the relic in Nakhon is not potent because the Buddha himself is thought to be “present” in it, nor is it a substitution for him, functioning just as he would if he was not so physically and temporally distant. No Buddhist I have ever spoken with believed a *chedi*, regardless of what it contains, could ever embody or bestow the prodigious blessings (let alone teachings) of an actual, living Buddha. And, of course, people are aware of the differences between a living human and a relic, *chedi*, or image, regardless of how miraculous any of the objects are or how much agency they are attributed. Additionally, relics are more than reminders of the historical Buddha, if they serve that function at all. In one sense, every monastery, mural, Buddha image, and bald, robe-clad monk, recreating the image of the original wandering ascetic, is a “reminder” of the Buddha and therefore the fact that he is no longer present. So, Harvey’s definition does little to distinguish Buddha relics from many other Buddhist people, places, and

---

<sup>50</sup> Spiro 1970: 203-204, emphasis mine

<sup>51</sup> Harvey 2010: 136, emphasis mine

things. More pertinently, I am interested in what devotees actually do, why they make certain choices regarding their practices, and what underlying conditions and characteristics of relics, monasteries, and material culture they assume that allow their actions to lead to meaningful results. In other words, the language of “presence” and “absence” when discussing relics of the Buddha obscures the nature of actual Buddhists’ practice by focusing solely on ontological or narrative connections to the historical Buddha, thereby isolating the relic from veneration and thus failing to account for the on-the-ground dynamics in which relics actually take part.

Approaches that only examine relics and their connection to the Buddha ignore that the relic is an integral component within a complex monastic space, replete with meaningful buildings, objects, and images, and inhabited by mobile and diverse practitioners. In short, they do not account for that fact that relics themselves are complex networks, imbued with agency, that act as an access point to the potency of the material nodal network.

John Strong, in an effort to avoid what he views as the fundamentally Christian logic underlying previous positions utilizing presence/absence language, posits that Buddha’s relics are “*expressions and extensions of his biography*,” embodying the whole of his existence; an existence that began long ago before he became the Buddha (e.g., in his previous births recounted in the Jātaka tales), during his most recent lifetime, and extending now via his relics into contemporary times. In this way, the Buddha’s relics constitute his “posterior lives.”<sup>52</sup> As such, they “do not make manifest some transcendent or immanent reality, but retell a tale; they sum up a biographical narrative; they embody the whole of the Buddha’s coming and going, his life-and-death story; they reiterate both his provenance and his impermanence.” Instead of positing the “presence” of the Buddha via his relics, Strong argues they serve as an extension of

---

<sup>52</sup> Strong 2004: 229

the “powerful narrative” by which the Buddha’s life ends at his *parinirvāṇa*, but his biography continues. In this way, while filling “roles the Buddha filled,” relics also continue with their own lives and adventures in ways the Buddha never did.<sup>53</sup> Steve Collins, like Strong, also suggests that relics can be understood through a conception of an extended biography,<sup>54</sup> as one may bring to mind the whole of the Buddha’s biography while venerating a relic.<sup>55</sup>

In fact, the inside of Wat Phra That’s relic chamber lends credence to the association between a Buddha relic and the Awakened One’s biography. When one enters the relic chamber the area straight ahead is a relatively narrow, red carpeted space between the base of the chamber steps and the back wall, which displays a large, standing Buddha with his hand in the *abhāya mudrā* position (i.e., his right arm is crooked as his right palm is held up, fingers upward and together, facing outwards; his left hand hangs by his side). As is common, his chief disciples, Sariputta and Moggallana, flank him, as do additional, smaller Buddha images. This carpeted space is the area for sitting and propitiating. The staircase is also a popular background for photos and selfies. On each side of the stairwell, so immediately to one’s left upon entering the chamber and again on the other side of the stairs, are raised reliefs that depict the famous tale of Siddhartha leaving his princely palace on his beloved horse, Kanthaka, to embark on the ascetic path. So, in a sense, the chamber and relic combined are a physical manifestation of the Buddha’s biography — the very beginning (Prince Siddhartha leaves the palace), middle (after attaining enlightenment Gotama has disciples), and end (entering *nibbana*, being cremated, and leaving a relic).

---

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*: 7-8

<sup>54</sup> Collins 2013: 10-11

<sup>55</sup> Collins 1992: 242 (cited in Strong 2004: 233)



**Image 3.4:** Relief in relic chamber depicts the future Buddha leaving the palace on horseback (photo by author)

The caveat, however, is that the reliefs while sometimes noticed (e.g., a small assemblage of gold squares indicates that a few have disregarded the signs prohibiting the application of gold fleck) are often paid little attention by devotees. This is particularly true for the relief furthest from the entrance, which can easily be overlooked, especially since the area in front of it is used to store donative goods and other random items. I have seen a couple people taking pictures of the reliefs nearest the door, but not many, as the main attraction is the stairwell flanked by colorful statues of mythically depicted *garuda*, lions, *yaksha*, tigers, *nāga*, Chatukam and Ramathep, and more. Thonthakuman and Rama (*phra ram*) are in gold relief against a green background, each on a door at the top of the staircase. During my observations in the relic chamber, I never saw anyone enter the area of the reliefs furthest from the entrance to examine them carefully or even take their photos. As discussed earlier, the setting or frame of something determines in large part the expectations of how one ought to behave, even if the objects comprising that setting go largely unnoticed. That is, even if objects may “appear inconsequential” and “remain peripheral to our

vision,” they can nonetheless be “determinant of our behavior and identity.”<sup>56</sup> And so, we must consider the possibility of this subconscious recognition of the surrounding exterior setting, and in light of textual and contextual evidence, we ought to take seriously the ideas of Collins and Strong regarding the connection between Buddha relics and his biography.

Furthermore, Collins, utilizing his encyclopedic knowledge of Pali texts, concludes that since there is no Pali term that can be translated as “presence,” when this language is invoked, scholars “are not thinking as Pali texts do.” To this end, Collins asks if Buddhas who have passed into *nirvāṇa* can “somehow ‘remain’ (*√sthā*)” and be “seen (*√dṛś*)” in their relics. He writes, “There is, indeed, no Pali systematic-metaphysical account of all this. They [the authors of the Pali texts] could have said that relics, and images are ‘alive’ (*sajīva*, for example: there could be many possible terms), but they don’t. We should, I suggest, respect the silences in Buddhist thought and leave them as silences.”<sup>57</sup> Like all personhood, both in life and subsequently after death, the Buddha’s has been radically distributed (in the case of corporeal relics this is quite literal). Indeed, the relic does not require a “present” or “living” Buddha to be potent; its *previous* physical connection to the Buddha makes it so already, albeit with a different set of possibilities and rules for its care. Importantly, the relic as a material object is imparted with social agency without any ontological necessity of somehow channeling the Buddha himself. We can thus then connect the materiality of the relic, its agency, and immaterial potency without necessitating his “presence.”

---

<sup>56</sup> Miller 2005: 5

<sup>57</sup> Collins 2013: 8. Collins writes on the “seventh stage” of a Buddha’s life: “After the nirvana of the Aggregates a Buddha persists (*√sthā*) and can be ‘seen’ (*√dṛś*), only in the sense that his relics and his *sāsana* persists, and his *dharmakāya* remains available to be ‘seen.’ His *rūpakāya* is now invisible.” Collins also clarifies that “*rūpakāya*” refers only to the physical body existing from conception to death. It does not, in all the Pali texts examined by Collins, refer to the Buddha’s relics (ibid.: 11).

While the textual approaches of Strong and Collins are both novel and uniquely illuminating, especially in light of the setting of the relic chamber, they nevertheless still maintain a focus on the life or person of the Buddha. However, when the practices of lay practitioners are taken seriously, we must shift away from an exclusive focus on the historical Buddha and his biography. Indeed, many Thai Buddhists do not bother themselves with questions regarding the Buddha's post-*nibbana* ontological status, as scholars, including myself, are wont to do. Admittedly, the first time I conducted research in Nakhon, I was interested in trying to answer precisely this type of question: Was the Buddha himself somehow accessible via his remaining tooth? Did devotees think about the Buddha as they *wai*-ed the doors of the relic chamber, assured the hidden tooth was concealed within the walls of the impressive *chedi*? In other words, these initial questions focused on the person of the Buddha, his relic, and Buddhists' relationships with the two. As I came to learn, while people may think about the Buddha while in the relic chamber venerating a "relic of the Buddha,"<sup>58</sup> most often they did not articulate their practice primarily in terms of the historical Buddha. For example, a 35 year-old man explained to me that the "Buddha lives on in the heart," so one can bring him to mind when they are about to do something immoral and therefore stop committing the negative act. This also works in the inverse whereby the Buddha, when called to the fore of one's mind, can help one do something virtuous. This seems to be precisely what Collins is referring to when he argues that relics can allow the sight of the Buddha in a way similar to how the *dhamma* is "seen" – in the mind's eye by being "imaginatively present." Interestingly, though, at Wat Phra That this was explained to me *against* a suggestion that the Buddha was necessarily thought about while venerating the relic, or that venerating the relic was the same as venerating the Buddha. As this

---

<sup>58</sup> Relics of the Buddha (*phra borom saririkkathat*) are not to be confused with the relics of other famous monks who are thought to have attained enlightenment.

man explained, one may bring the Buddha to mind whenever one likes — a relic is not needed to do so. The relic itself, on the other hand, offers other possibilities, including direct access to a potency that can assist one in matters troubling them at the time or with their practicing of *dhamma*. That is, an efficacious node can enhance one's ability to recall and implement *dhamma*, and further, can yield tangible results (e.g., improvement in mood, health, fortune, etc.) During my fieldwork, I found that many others also explain the relic as a key site through which the ability to recall and implement *dhamma* may be utilized. Thus, while one can recall bits of a teaching or one's general idea of Buddhist virtue whenever one likes, and then act according to their perceived prescriptions anywhere, it is more efficacious to do so near nodal points. So, for example, one can regularly venerate a shrine in their house, but if they are particularly upset or in need of assistance, s/he is far more likely to visit the monastery. In other words, the nexus and certain nodes offer ease and assistance in turning these recollections of *dhamma* into the production of specific, desired moral and material ends.

Importantly, it is true that the reason the relic is described as auspicious (*sirimongkhon*), sacred/holy (*saksit*), influential (*itthiphon/ itthiphon nai jai*), and powerful (*amnat*) is because it was at one point physically connected to the Buddha. However, it is this seemingly simple fact that seems to have obscured much previous scholarship. This is not the reason people come to visit the relic — this is the reason the object is auspicious, holy, influential, and powerful *in and of itself*. Instead, people tend visit the relic shrine as a means of positively affecting their emotional state and to maintain, increase, or encourage their *dhamma* (read: Buddhist) practice, through the making of offerings and frequently through the making of pacts. That devotees visit an entire monastic complex is key since the relic is but one object that is propitiated and with which pacts are entered into. One does not teleport from the breakfast table to appear

miraculously within the relic chamber. Rather, they enter Wat Phra That from various entrances and pass a myriad of structures, stopping to venerate in particular ways at those they choose; one may slightly bow their head and *wai* while still in full stride, or instead perform a more complex act of devotion that includes full prostrations, offerings of incense, candles, and flowers, and silent or audible recitations of particular chants.

Clarification will be helpful here. Gotama Buddha was the most recent in a line of perfectly enlightened Buddhas, each with a finite material existence in this world. The *dhamma* and *sāsana*, by contrast, are not only ongoing but also dependent upon the preservation of texts that contain teachings, and crucially, upon practitioners' moral maintenance through virtuous action.<sup>59</sup> The teachings lose their value, and quite literally fade from existence, if nobody is using them. And so, preserving texts slows the inevitable loss of the teachings in material form; practicing virtuously allows for the embodiment of its lessons, and so the tradition. Gotama Buddha was never dependent upon such maintenance. Buddhas during their lifetimes do not require incense or offerings, for example, to retain their power, and offerings cannot increase it. According to Buddhist thought, however, with the death of a Buddha, the *dhamma* immediately begins deteriorating, and thus it becomes the duty of followers to actively preserve it. The material relics of the Buddha exist within complex networks, radiating potency, inspiring devotion, dramatically affecting their surrounding spaces, and crucially, being impacted by all of this as well. Relics cannot be thought of as existing outside of these relationships that inscribe them with meaning. Thus, we must continue to move outward from the relic. In doing so, we see

---

<sup>59</sup> By *dhamma*, I mean Buddhist teachings in the sense of actual texts (i.e., both oral and preserved in writing), as well as in broader sense of the truths described (however these are understood by devotees). The *dhamma* as explicated by the Buddha describes a particular reality, how to most successfully function in it, and ultimately how to escape from it. The nature of this reality never changes. However, its explication fades.

how devotees seek to assist in the preservation the *dhamma* through righteous Buddhist practice, often times by developing relationships with certain objects.

### **Entreating Objects for Aid and Cultivating the Self**

Devotional action that is directed at particular images, objects, or structures, and which may require extended commitment to fulfill the practitioner's end of a bargain, both accesses and through reinvestment, sustains the nodal network. So, through examining relationships within the monastic space we can see how Buddhists actively draw from and replenish the Buddhist potency contained within the material nodal network.

The most common type of activity throughout any monastery is the making of offerings (*ganbucha*), which are performed each time someone visits a monastery, and at multiple objects throughout. Often times with an accompanying devotional prayer, flowers, incense, candles, and/or gold fleck are placed before or on an object, image, tree, spirit house, etc. People may also offer photographs, drinks, smaller images of Buddhas or other beings, and, since very few things in Thailand are absent the presence of food, snacks. At Wat Phra That, orange or yellow cloth is often offered. Moreover, offerings can be tailored to the likes of the venerated image or object. The statue of King Taksin<sup>60</sup> is known to aid businesspersons in achieving success or overcoming hardship. Located near the entrance to the chanting hall, it is often propitiated with ceramic roosters by those hoping to curry favor from this image. As the heroic king's favorite animal, this is a welcome offering. While making an offering, devotees may wish (*kho phon*), for example,

---

<sup>60</sup> King Taksin (r. 1767-1782) is known for his military skill, having participated in various wars, and for establishing Thonburi after defeating the Burmese, who sought to conquer Ayutthaya. He is the last king before the beginning of Chakri Dynasty that continues today. Additionally, he descended from a family of Chinese merchants, perhaps a partial clue as to why he continues to be venerated by business people. There is also a Chinese-style *stūpa* near his image at Wat Phra That.

for happiness for themselves and their family, general well-being and good fortune, help in passing an exam, safe travels, etc. In these instances, there is no promise made that if a wish is fulfilled a specific action will be taken by the devotee. When this type of wish is made during a large ritual or festival it may be described as *buang suang*, which indicates that it is performed in a more organized, elaborate, or formal setting (e.g., at a funeral or during a Buddhist holiday; there is typically a quorum to large group of monks and perhaps novices for chanting and receiving offerings, and local government officials may be present and seated in the first few rows of an audience, in front of the laity). I spoke with a pair of sisters, who twice a month make a forty minute drive from a northern district in the province to *kho phon* and ask for safety and general well-being. Like many visitors to the monastery they refer to these trips as fun outings (*tiao*); they are something they look forward to and enjoy, rather than something perceived as mandatory, tedious, or solemn. While the building housing their favorite image, that of King Asoke of Nakhon, is not always open, they are sure to *wai* the relic during each trip. Moreover, they enjoy these visits because they always leave feeling content, happy, and secure.

Some practitioners utilize particular spaces to meditate, hoping to improve their practice by drawing on the power of the place and objects within it.<sup>61</sup> Spirit mediums may also utilize the potency of a space to more easily become possessed by various deities, in order to give blessings and fortunes to visitors at the monastery. The spirit medium I met in the courtyard of Wat Phra That explained it in precisely this way.<sup>62</sup> Friends and lovers make serious, lifelong vows of loyalty (*saban*) to each other; if the vow of devotion is made before the relic, breaking it poses a

---

<sup>61</sup> At Wat Rakhang in Bangkok, manuscripts of Somdet To were ground down and put in the paint that would be used on the ceiling of his monastery. In this way, his words infuse the space with his apotropaic efficaciousness, and meditators who practice there continue to reap the benefits. See McDaniel (2011) for an in-depth study of Somdet To.

<sup>62</sup> This woman has been a medium for about thirty years and can become possessed by ten different gods or spirits, although she has no say in which one will inhabit her in each instance. Sometimes, she explained, these are “Hindu gods” and yet, they always give Buddhist teachings and advice.

risk to one's physical well-being and even life. One may also *saban* if they are afraid and plead for the repercussions of an accidental negative act to be lessened or abated. Additionally, in a controversial practice, some people seek revenge before the relic (*sabanbon*). In these instances, one perceives another has unjustly harmed them (e.g., they were robbed or someone caused them to get into a vehicular accident) and thus a *saksit* object is petitioned by the victim to inflict harm on the perpetrator. Here, the self-identified victim appeals to the ability of certain objects to sow pain and destruction on one deserving of it. To be sure, many I spoke with thought of this as a particularly “non-Buddhist” practice. Nonetheless, the fact remains, this is a way the nodal network is tapped.

Among the most ubiquitous practices throughout Thai monasteries is what I call “pact-making” (*kho bon gae bon*). Because of the level of involvement with a pact, they are not entered into during every visit to a monastery and are made before only one object (i.e., not before a series of objects during a single visit like when making routine offerings). In this relational engagement, people enter the relic shrine or venerate another object and ask for assistance for themselves or their family in matters troubling them at the time (e.g., their wellbeing or the health of a child, their love life, an upcoming exam, a pregnancy, business dealings, etc.), and make an accompanying corollary promise to be fulfilled should the request be granted. This involves: first, a request (*kho bon*) and a promise made at the same time; second, if the request is fulfilled, there is an obligation to keep the promise (*gae bon*).<sup>63</sup> When asking for this assistance, if a practitioner promises to do something specific if the request is fulfilled (e.g., if one's illness is cured, they will ordain as a monk for some period of time), they are entering into a pact.

---

<sup>63</sup> One may also *saban* and then *gae bon*, if they are asking for relief from the pain someone else is causing them. So, for example, a heavy-hearted wife may plead that her husband stops having an affair and promise to fulfill a promise if he does.

This requires a longer, more rigorous commitment than a blessing request (*kho phon*), which is transaction that takes place at one time (e.g., one offers candles and flowers to an image while asking for a general life blessing). So, when there is nothing particularly wrong or troublesome at the time, one may *kho phon* (e.g., to maintain good health for oneself and their family or to continue with a successful business venture). Since *kho phon* is performed in conjunction with frequent, regular offerings and the chants accompanying an image (often performed internally, at a quiet whisper, or with just the lips moving and bits of sound escaping),<sup>64</sup> one does not need a specific reason to do this. And so, typically a pact is made by the person seeking assistance, rather than for the benefit of another. On the other hand, while making general requests (*kho phon*) devotees often ask for the blessings to be bestowed upon their family, their friends, and perhaps throughout all the world. Both of these are also different from making an explicit internal resolution, hope, or wish (*athitthan*). With this type of informal resolution, no external display is required; there is no offering, no required chant, and indeed these can be performed anywhere (e.g., while sitting in a truck driving past a monastery). This is similar to, for example, one crossing their fingers and internally declaring their wish that they receive the job for which they recently interviewed. Or, before a sporting event, one may tightly close their eyes and hope for a successful performance and ultimate victory. Thus, *athitthan* is much less transactional; there are not necessarily objects involved (for veneration or offering) and no promise made that if the wish is fulfilled some specific righteous action will be taken.

To elaborate, the request made during pact-making may be similar to those one may wish for (*kho phon*), but it is usually made in a more serious or thoughtful manner, and is often more specific. Furthermore, over time, the same image may be propitiated repeatedly in various ways.

---

<sup>64</sup> Typically, there are placards that provide the appropriate chant to accompany the image. This is in addition to the thrice-repeated veneration of the Triple Gem.

As a meaningful relationship is created and maintained between it and a loyal devotee, the propensity for the object to grant requests increases. One monk explained that *kho phon* and *kho bon* are similar, but the former is done more freely and with less thoughtfulness (*kho baep loi loi*). For example, one may *kho phon* for good health in general, but when facing a particular illness or health crisis the practitioner may chose to enter into a pact seeking a cure. Or, for example, I was told that if I entered into a pact for the successful completion of my dissertation, I could promise to return and apply gold fleck throughout the monastery. This would be a time consuming, expensive, and very wholesome way to repay the aid provided to me, and thus an appropriate method for upholding my end of the pact. In another example, I spoke with a woman in her early twenties, clad in the all-white dress of laity temporarily staying at the monastery. Her black hair was pulled loosely back in a scrunchi as she leaned intently over a book of Buddhist chants. In the hopes of passing an upcoming employment competence examination, she previously had come to Wat Phra That to enter into a pact. If she passed, she promised she would return to ordain as a lay ascetic for three days focusing on Buddhist chanting, meditating, and receiving teachings from elders. She smiled widely, speaking with a bit of relief in her voice as she boasted about being successful in her exam. Thus, she was completing her three-day stay at the monastery and fulfilling her promise (i.e., the *gae bon* aspect of a pact).

On a bright Saturday afternoon sitting in Wat Phra That's large ordination hall, I spoke with a woman wearing a stylish white dress with gold accents that glittered in the light and blew in the wind created by the large collection of pastel-colored fans lining the wall. A piece of gold fleck fluttered past my face. She eagerly took countless pictures of the ceremony accompanying the ordination of her husband, which would last fifteen days. Her young daughter and an extended cohort of family surrounded her as they all proudly watched this soldier don his orange

robes and take the monastic vows. Working in the far south amongst a volatile conflict, he had remained safe while his wife and young daughter were happy and healthy. This was his request and he was ordaining to fulfill his previous promise. Being the most auspicious and powerful monastery in the region, he had made his pact and subsequently ordained at Wat Phra That, even though he would reside as a monk in a local monastery near his home. The same day as the soldier's ordination, there was another in which the man was temporarily ordaining since he had recovered from a grave illness through the power of pact-making. In fact, there were often multiple ordinations of this type on any given day. It should be noted that ordination into the monastic order as a form of *gae bon* is not any less respected than doing so for another reason and is equally as celebrated by family and friends. Quite the contrary, since the fact that requests have been fulfilled it is all the more reason for others to be invested in the rituals and Buddhism itself.



**Image 3.5:** Man ordains to fulfill pact in Ordination Hall (photo by author)

On another day, I spoke with a woman strolling through the onsite market who was scanning the booths filled with Buddhist accouterments, souvenirs highlighting Nakhon culture, and silver jewelry, of which the local craftsmanship offers great pride to residents. She was

wearing the all white dress of a lay devotee. Years earlier, she was having several complications during her pregnancy, and no doctor could determine the medical problem. Thus, she had come to Wat Phra That desperate for a solution to any mother's gravest fears and promised to ordain as a lay ascetic for seven days if her baby was born and remained healthy. When I spoke with her she beamed about her jubilant 4-year-old as she was, at last, fulfilling her promise.

Besides physical and moral commitments, one may also promise to donate an expensive or elaborate gift to *gae bon*. Each time this is done, another object is added to the network. As such, there is a massive and continually growing collection of these types of objects at Wat Phra That including gems, jewelry, statues, Buddha images, gold and silver decorative trees, and currency. Many of these images are on display in the on-site museum; however, I have been told that the collection is so robust that a mere quarter or perhaps third of all the donated gifts can be displayed in the large space.<sup>65</sup>

Importantly, pacts can be made before the object of the devotees choosing. Often, as in the instances above, because the relic is considered the most powerful object, the nexus within the network, practitioners *kho bon* within the relic chamber. However, visitors, especially locals, develop personal relationships with different objects or statues within the monastic complex.<sup>66</sup> For example, one local businesswoman's favorite statue stands tall in an entrance room to the gallery of Buddha images. Venerating this image of Hemachala,<sup>67</sup> the woman who originally brought the relic to Nakhon safely protected in her hair, had led to the successful fulfillment of a request of hers in the past. It also helps that Hemachala was a strong, righteous woman —

---

<sup>65</sup> Photography is prohibited in the gift display room.

<sup>66</sup> McDaniel writes, "Many Thai Buddhists do not give gifts blindly to random images simply out of custom. Gifts and incantations are often catered to particular images with which they have developed a relationship" (McDaniel 2011b: 257).

<sup>67</sup> This particular image will be discussed at length in the following chapter.

something she could relate and aspire to! Therefore, when she visits Wat Phra That, she spends most of her time at this image, often bypassing the busier relic chamber all together. A couple of older, local men told me they preferred to venerate the statues of Hemachala and Thonthakuman standing together in front of their junk ship holding the relic in its gilded container,<sup>68</sup> located in the back courtyard near the ordination hall. Since the siblings are heroes of local import, they remain interested in the well-being of the town's citizens, the men explained. This local, historical connection makes them particularly efficacious in carrying out the wishes of those who propitiate them regularly.<sup>69</sup>

These are long-term, sustained relationships between objects and practitioners that are actively maintained through visitation, bodily propitiation, common offerings (e.g., flowers, incense, gold leaf, candles, and coins), as well as other gifts (e.g., photos, small images of the Buddha, other deities, famous monks, historical royalty, local heroes, and other trinkets). As nodes within the network, each time they are propitiated their significance and potency are reinforced and grow. This then mutually reinforces the other objects, including the relic, within the space.

Yet beyond this, the act of making a pact can lead to embarking on projects of self-improvement, guided by Buddhist principles. In other words, often inherent in these relational engagements between devotee and object is the maintaining, increasing, or encouraging of one's

---

<sup>68</sup> The historiographic accounts set forth in the town and relic chronicles were described in Chapter Two. They narrate how the Buddha's tooth arrived in Nakhon. In brief: according to the local chronicles, siblings Princess Hemachala and Prince Thonthakuman smuggle the left eyetooth out of India, destined for Sri Lanka. However, stormy seas and Buddhist fate maroon the tooth relic in Siam, where it is hidden in a sand dune on the shores of Nakhon. After making this important detour on its way to Lanka, so the story goes, the Lankan king sends the relic back to Nakhon, where half of it is eventually enshrined in the town's *chedi*.

<sup>69</sup> We will return to this particular image of the siblings in front of their junk ship in Chapter Three. In an attempt to improve the aesthetics of the monastery, this image has been moved from a prominent position near a gate leading toward the central *chedi* to an obscure location in a back courtyard. This is a cause of concern for locals, who fear the objects may not be receiving the attention they both deserve and require.

*dhamma* practice. In these instances, pacts form the basis for righteous self-cultivation, a striving for a more ideal self through the conscious development of virtuous behavior. In fact, many I spoke with did not expect to have a request fulfilled if they did not “practice *dhamma*” (*patibat tham*) in their daily lives, for laity, most commonly articulated as, at a minimum, keeping the five precepts, which “are good for life.”<sup>70</sup> This in turn is thought to bolster one’s righteousness, their community, and even Buddhism itself.

Indeed, visiting a *wat* is in and of itself a moral act, which immediately produces positive mental states; the very act of entering the pulsating nodal network provides not only direct comfort for many, but can also aid in the recollection and embodiment of Buddhist *dhamma*. For example, a coffee merchant said she stopped by the monastery daily for a sense of calm and comfort (*khwam sabaijai*) and joy (*khwam suk nai jai*). An older man explained that Wat Phra That is a “place for cleanliness,” since one can make merit there and help “purify the *citta* [mind, consciousness].” Similarly, another man said he comes to have a “clean heart” and venerating the relic helps him practice the *dhamma* in his everyday life.<sup>71</sup> Likewise, a monk explained that visiting the relic helps to purify the *citta*, making it “clear, like a clear sky.” It also helps one spread *metta* (loving-kindness) into the world as one has to “practice *dhamma*, make merit, [and] do good.” He emphasized that one must practice *dhamma*, and to that end, the relic can help increase mindfulness (*sati*). All of this helps practitioners cultivate wholesome dispositions and implement Buddhist teachings.<sup>72</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> In short: no killing, stealing, lying, having affairs, or taking of intoxicants

<sup>71</sup> It should go without saying that one may experience unpleasant or negative emotions at a monastery as well. The inverse of what I am describing here may occur whereby the space itself or a particular image may invoke sadness, anxiety, stress, a sense of loss, fear, anger, frustration, etc. Of course, others may be apathetic.

<sup>72</sup> This monk also explained that the potency of the relic could help eradicate the negative effects of black magic.

Even some of those who simply made a wish (*kho phon*) (i.e., there is no promise made that certain actions will be taken if the request is granted), said they did not expect anything without practicing *dhamma* more seriously than they had been prior. For example, the aforementioned coffee merchant told me she often requests success (*samret*) in her business, while also asking for help in becoming a better person, which she felt would make her happier. If she hoped to see any results, she explained, she must “do good outside” by “practicing Buddhism in life.” This means keeping the five precepts, extends to treating others well, and includes taking care of the environment. In fact, I was frequently told the *dhamma* (*phra tham, thamma*) is inextricably linked to nature (*thamma chat*). This linguistic connection was interpreted as meaning that the Buddha’s *dhamma* cannot be thought except in conjunction with the natural environment and the necessity for people to protect and care for it. To be sure, some feel they are under no obligation to change their behavior after a simple offering accompanied by a wish (and perhaps not even after entering into a pact). However, the chances of reaping the results of the request increase with committed, moral action.

Furthermore, the active practice of self-cultivation is thought to lead to a more wholesome family, local community, and Buddhist *sāsana*. People are not passive and powerless as they wait for desired results. As these members of their community return to their daily routines, they are often driven to behave more wholesomely. Taking the five precepts more seriously, like done while engaged in a pact, benefits the family, community, and even the environment, while negative acts are more actively avoided and Buddhist tenets are enacted and preserved. In a more direct way, if the request is fulfilled, the practitioner returns to the monastery to fulfill their part of the agreement. This end of the agreement is typically more rigorous, and therefore more wholesome, than simply, or perhaps casually, maintaining the five

precepts. Thus, these commitments usually come in the form of concentrated piety (e.g., short-term asceticism accompanied by intensified precept keeping), and/or monetary and gift offerings to the monastery.

As such, lay people, who through the maintenance of precepts and keeping their commitments promised during pact-making are foundational in the network of potency sustaining the monastery and Buddhist community. So, they are also nodes in the network. This argument further blurs the lines between so-called “worldly” and “other-worldly” types of Buddhist practice, a reoccurring, popular means of classifying Theravāda Buddhist devotion. It may be, and often is, suggested that asking for improved health, luck in love, help in conceiving a child, or for success on an upcoming exam, for example (i.e., common requests made at the monastery), are “materialist,” “worldly,” or more harshly, selfish, for distracting from the so-called “true,” supramundane goal of Buddhist practice, *nibbana* and total escape from the rounds of rebirth, *samsāra*. Among the most common ways Theravāda Buddhism, and particularly Buddhism in Thailand and Southeast Asia, has been explained is through the dichotomy of worldly (Pali: *lokiya*) versus non-worldly (Pali: *lokuttara*), or mundane versus supramundane. In this formulation, the former aspect of the binary includes concerns with wealth, health, power, love, safety, fame, long life, etc. It also includes the goals of gods, goddess, and hell beings.<sup>73</sup> *Lokotarra* aims, on the other hand, are focused exclusively on obtaining enlightenment. As such, so this reasoning speculates, righteous monks ought to be focused only on reaching *nibbana* by “leaving” society and concentrating on meditation. The layperson’s aims, achieved through making merit, can only be worldly.

---

<sup>73</sup> McDaniel 2011: 113

Spiro's classic categorization of village Buddhism in Burma is an example of this type of classification. He argues Theravāda Buddhist practice can be divided into three types: nibbanic (attaining enlightenment), kammanic (striving for a better rebirth by making merit), and apotropaic (magic that enlists immediate aid or protection, and is focused on the avoidance of harm). Nibbanic practice is *lokotarra*, but the latter two are *lokiya*. Spiro writes, "Far from being a means to salvation, worldly activity in nibbanic Buddhism is its irreducible obstacle; rather than a proof, worldly activity constitutes a disproof for one's chances of being saved."<sup>74</sup> In another example, Yoneo Ishii writes, "The orthodox doctrines of Buddhism, those oriented to the otherworldly realm, hold little interest for the majority of Thais. Their concern is not to transcend the cycle of rebirths but to improve their position in this world."<sup>75</sup> These distinctions have often been used to criticize monks who practice magic, tell fortunes, or otherwise meddle in the affairs of everyday folk. They are thus classed pejoratively as concerned with *lokiya* matters. The noble monk, on the other hand, has retreated away from these types of societal concerns, and instead focuses on his meditation and path towards enlightenment.

In contemporary Thailand, this type of distinction has extended to lay practitioners and is articulated by some devotees.<sup>76</sup> "Real" Buddhists, so the reasoning goes, focus on meditation and *dāna* (giving) without any expectation of return or reward. I spoke with a few members of a group of Buddhists from Bangkok who were in Nakhon to raise money for several, expensive statues to be built in commemoration of an abbot's birthday. One of the women explained to me, quite carefully, that she and her group both meditated and raised money for monks — both

---

<sup>74</sup> Spiro 1970: 453

<sup>75</sup> Ishii 1986: 14

<sup>76</sup> This is, in many ways, a legacy of the famous monk, Bhuddhadasa Bhikkhu.

honorable Buddhist practices.<sup>77</sup> She even showed me a small photo of one of her colleagues, who she believed had attained special meditational achievements, which were evidenced by the halo of light surrounding the woman's head (she carried around many of these photos, which are their own meditational power source). A true Buddhist indeed. On the other hand, she told me that people who came to the monastery and asked for something in return (e.g., health, wealth, etc.) were not practicing "real Buddhism." In the mundane/supramundane dichotomy, these requests are thought of as selfish, emotional, and concerned only with acquiring wealth, prestige, and security in this lifetime. In other words, they are materialistic, albeit pragmatic, and thus imbued with desire, the quintessential driving force of all that leads to suffering. Authentic Buddhist objectives ought to be transcendent.

Justin McDaniel summarizes a version of this problematic:

I am not concerned with which practice is considered *lokottara* or *lokiya*. However, by relegating the practice of protective rituals [ . . . ] to something outside religion or something non-Buddhist or even something worldly, then they cannot be studied or understood as something integral to Thai Buddhist life [ . . . ] it suggests that millions of Buddhists, including the royal family, intellectuals, and thousands of nuns, novices, [and] monks are somehow ignorant or are simply going through the motions for the sake of traditions. They have mistaken culture for religion, the mundane for the supramundane.<sup>78</sup>

What I am suggesting is a bit different from McDaniel, who is arguing for the legitimacy, pervasiveness, and integralness of so-called "worldly" practices. I want to propose that there is in fact a type of sliding spectrum between these two poles, whereby mundane practices can become the basis for spiritual cultivation. On this sliding scale of rigor, requests made during offerings are on the less laborious end than those made during pacts. Entering the monastery and engaging various objects — creating and enacting meaning through sustaining the nodal network — is a

---

<sup>77</sup> Here the casting of new, expensive images is considered a valid practice for "real" Buddhists, rather than being seen as "worldly" and "materialistic."

<sup>78</sup> McDaniel 2011: 117

more complex and righteous behavior than those who dismiss it outright as separate from what they perceive as “true” Buddhist objectives.

Here, it is worth clarifying why I have chosen “pact” rather than “vow.” In *Dealing with Deities* (2012), the editors class vows into two types: first, “Getting What You Want” or “mundane vows”; and second, “Getting What You Need” or “soteriological vows.” Raj and Harman are worth quoting at length, since they reify the mundane/supramundane dichotomy (what I am arguing is false) in relation to lay “vows:”

Soteriological vows are concerned with each individual’s ultimate spiritual achievement, with what we all suspect we need to be concerned eventually. But that need is easier for most of us to postpone. Mundane vows, on the other hand, are concerned with achieving the good life in society, and with materialism, stability, and order [ . . . ] Vows taken in relation to soteriological goals are diffuse, and point toward *transcendent and ultimate* ends that could be described as *other-worldly*, thus not easily specified. Vows taken in relation to the *mundane* concerns are nonsoteriological, proximate rather than ultimate, and very much *this-worldly*. Soteriological vows pursue salvation in the world(s) to come, such as liberation from rebirth, salvation, nirvana, or heavenly bliss. Mundane vows pursue prosperity and success right now, in this world, and include vows for passing exams, healing, fertility, and prosperity. Soteriological vows are about getting ‘saved’ eventually; mundane vows are about living well now.”<sup>79</sup>

I refer to the precepts that both laity and monastics take as vows (Thai: *sin*; Pali: *sīla*).<sup>80</sup> These precepts must be given by a religious specialist (i.e., in Thailand, typically a monk or *mae chi*); on the other hand, no specialist is needed for a devotee to enter into a pact. The consequence of violating a precept that regulates behavior varies depending on the infraction (e.g., a monk may confess to his peers,<sup>81</sup> undergo a ritual purification, or be expelled from the ascetic life).

Typically, however, the infraction incurs a *kammic* penalty in and of itself (e.g., committing

---

<sup>79</sup> Raj and Harman 2012: 250; emphasis mine

<sup>80</sup> Monks will take 227 precepts, fully ordained nuns will take 311, and novices and *mae chi* will take eight. Lay people typically take five precepts, but on certain auspicious holidays they may take eight (or more).

<sup>81</sup> Monks commonly *sadaeng abat* every fortnight. At this time, among their fellow monastics, monks say a few stanzas in Pali admitting they have committed various offenses, and stating they will try to avoid doing it in the future. This small-scale confession is quite routine, and the committing of infractions, especially with 227 precepts, is not regarded as seriously problematic in any way. Monks are, in reality, breaking rules all the time.

adultery results in *kammic* demerit (Thai: *akuson* or *bap kam*; Pali: *akusala kamma*,) that one will experience at some later time). The repercussion of breaking the obligation to fulfill a promise made during the pact may be more immediate and more serious (e.g., physical harm). Moreover, both laity and ascetics can enter into pacts, but the nature of their vocations means their vows are interpreted differently (e.g., the avoidance of sexual misconduct can be taken to mean not committing adultery for the laity, but monastics are prohibited from any type of sexual act).<sup>82</sup>

Through examining the practice of pact-making we have seen how Buddhists strive to become better, and this cultivation of an ideal self is also said to simultaneously benefit the community. Anna Gade in her illuminating study of Qur’ānic learning, recitation, and performance in Indonesia argues that through voluntary ritual repetition practitioners are driven to continue perfecting their performance in order to achieve a more ideal self. In other words, rituals, even when highly structured, are not merely performed repetitively and effortlessly; rather, they are a self-conscious means by which devotees improve their performance, and therefore continually cultivate their ideal selves. Thus, “orthopraxy” can be understood not as fixed and standardized, but open-ended; the potential to improve oneself is a continuously expanding horizon, and ritual helps this expansion. Moreover, Gade argues that individuals, who undertake projects of textual memorization and therefore preservation, do so with the

---

<sup>82</sup> In writing about Buddhist vows made at Kataragama in Sri Lanka, Goonasekera says that a vow is “a promise one makes to oneself,” or a “promise made to a supernatural being to propitiate that being for performing a requested favor.” He goes on to say that *sīla* are “behavioral restrictions that a person imposes upon herself in order to stay away from spiritual defilement and to purify herself so that soteriological progress is hastened,” and are “soteriological and disciplinary.” He utilizes this as the basis for arguing that devotees at Kataragama who engage in *bara*, a vow made while propitiating a deity, are neither disciplinary or soteriological. This is the precise type of distinction I am arguing against — at Wat Phra That devotees make pacts at the relic shrine, but then engage in *sīla*, which fosters a process of self-cultivation aimed at increasing morality, virtue, and Buddhist righteousness. Trying to separate these processes of pact making and keeping into distinct varieties (e.g., soteriological versus worldly) is forcing an unnatural categorization (Goonasekera 2012: 107).

simultaneous goal of preserving their religious community. Thus, memorization is a “technology of community,” whereby the “feedback between goals of community-building and self-cultivation” is prominent.<sup>83</sup>

In another study of the relationship between ritual and moral development, Talal Asad argues that the formalized monastic discipline of Medieval Christian monks was instrumental in cultivating the moral character of the devotee (in this instance, creating the dispositions of humility and obedience).<sup>84</sup> Thus particular, ritualized practices, rather than being a domain separate from “ordinary” life and one’s ethics, can be used to cultivate ethics outside of formal spaces. Inspired by these insights, I propose that object veneration be viewed as an open-ended orthopraxy, which can be part of a larger process of moral self-cultivation, and therefore becomes a technology of community. The process of entering pact-making, and even making wishes, can create better Buddhists, which in turn strengthens families, communities, and the Buddhist *sāsana*. Regardless of what the practitioner requests, through these individual commitments the community is reinforced, and *dhamma* and Buddhism are preserved. When we shift the focus away from *what* people are asking for, we thereby eliminate the unhelpful distinction between “this-worldly” and “other-worldly” goals, which themselves only fit awkwardly into idealized Buddhist narratives. Instead, we can focus on a larger process of moral self-cultivation, part of which is developed in the ritualized veneration of relics but which also continues as people move through the monastery and return to their homes.

In sum, I have argued that the practice of entreating objects for aid leads to the active cultivation of moral behavior in the daily lives of many practitioners, who are continuously striving to become better Buddhists, and who are driven to keep wholesome promises made in a

---

<sup>83</sup> Gade 2004: 75

<sup>84</sup> Asad 1993: 130

pact. The mere act of visiting the monastic complex and thereby entering the nodal network helps foster wholesome dispositions and reduces negative ones. This prevents moral atrophy. Moreover, the nodal network is reinforced through these individual commitments as the *dhamma* and Buddhist community – and so Buddhism itself – are preserved.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I proposed that devotees participate in and develop relationships within a material nodal network comprised of objects and images that emit and absorb immaterial potency. Drawing from Gell, we saw how this nodal network is an integral part of the working cosmos, and yet remains dependent on the agency of objects and devotees. From there, I argued against the language of presence and absence for explaining relics of the Buddha, since it both imposes an emphasis on and ontological connections to the historical Buddha when we often do not see those associations made during lived practice. Moreover, it isolates the Buddha relic from the rest of the nodal network. Finally, we saw how the potency generated within the nodal network is tapped through devotional acts as practitioners embark on projects of righteous self-cultivation fostered through relationships with an object or image.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### LOCAL HERO(INE)S AS BUDDHAS: DUAL IDENTITIES OF BUDDHAS IN ROYAL DRESS

*~Buddhas are multitaskers; they bring rain and good harvests, blessings and protection. They inspire, and bring peace and calm to the heart. They stretch the sober categories of religious studies and boggle scholars' imaginations.*  
~Peter Skilling<sup>1</sup>

Entering Wat Phra That through the aptly named and central “Crown Prince Gate,” one immediately sees a towering, golden figure in royal regalia. The image resides behind protective glass on the platform in front of the Chanting Hall, built directly in line with the principal *chedi*. The placard for the statue, installed on the short gate surrounding the base of the image’s enclosure, is difficult to read as it is almost entirely covered in thin pieces of square gold fleck, applied over time by merit-making devotees. Looking closely, it says “*phra thonthakuman*,” indicating the statue is that of Thonthakuman, the young prince who, along with his sister, originally brought the relic of the Buddha’s left eyetooth to Nakhon. And yet, the statue is also another crown prince; it is the former prince of the Shakya clan, the Buddha, heavily adorned in regal garb.

While this image looks down upon all those climbing the front steps of the Chanting Hall, its partner is a bit more hidden, set in a back portion of the same building but only accessible from a separate entrance.<sup>2</sup> The figure offers its tutelage to the monastery’s gallery of Buddha images, which begins when exiting the room and lines the wall encompassing the central *chedi*, its minor companions, and everything else in the inner courtyard. This image, holding out both

---

<sup>1</sup> Skilling 2012: 22

<sup>2</sup> Although technically located at the back of the chanting hall, the Buddha/Hemachala image is not accessible from that building. Rather, it is in a room at the entrance to the gallery, accessed after proceeding toward the principal *chedi* through the wall surrounding the inner courtyard.

its hands symmetrically with palms forward, is also regally adorned. For some local visitors to Wat Phra That, particularly women, this is their favorite image, the one with whom they have cultivated a relationship as it is known to bestow them with blessings and assistance when they are in need.<sup>3</sup> It does not bear a large placard like its partner in the front of the hall. Rather, a smaller one inset in the wall identifies the image as Princess Hemachala, the sister to Thonthakuman, who bravely secured the Buddha's crystal eyetooth relic in her tied-up locks as the pair traversed various obstacles in order to bring the relic to safety. But like its partner in the front of the hall, this statue is readily apparent as an image of the Buddha adorned with jewelry and wearing the elaborate shoes of royals past that come to an upturned point. The figure is at once the female heroine so very important to the town's historiography and identity and the Buddha himself.

These images of Hemachala/Buddha and Thonthakuman/Buddha contrast with their other statuary at Wat Phra That. Situated on a platform in the back courtyard, they stand in front of their junk ship as the barefoot Hemachala holds the casket containing the relic. Her brother is beside her and both display slight smiles and downcast eyes.<sup>4</sup> The astute observer will notice that Hemachala is slightly taller than her brother, perhaps a subtle, yet noticeable visual clue indicating her overall importance to the viewer (see Images 2.1 and 2.2). The pair represents their characters from the chronicle; they do not bear the external marks of an enlightened Buddha, as is clearly indicated by, among other things, their varied-length fingers and toes.

Angela Chiu argues that in the Lankan *Dāthāvamsa*, the Prince and Princess (a married couple) are “depicted as rather uncertain and vulnerable; the snake gods easily snatched the relic

---

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter Three

<sup>4</sup> These images will be discussed again in Chapters Four and Five. They have been moved from a prominent position near the monastery's entrance to an elevated platform in a back corner of the space.

from them, only surrendering it when an *arhant* overwhelmed the snake gods with the magical powers he had obtained through his study of higher Buddhist knowledge.”<sup>5</sup> From her perspective, the pair are mere counterpoints to the miraculous power of mythical *nāga* beasts and the supernatural abilities of an impressive *arhant*. On the other hand, in my reading of the Nakhon chronicles, the siblings are heroes in the tale — they are vulnerable because they are transporting a most precious object, not because they are uncertain. In doing so, they put themselves at great personal risk as they encounter adversity and the powerful forces that wish to disrupt their ultimate goal. Indeed, in sailing from Nakhon to Lanka after burying the relic on the beach, the crew of their ship plots their murder.<sup>6</sup> More importantly for our purposes, however, is that they are treated as heroes by Nakhon residents and in the statuery on the grounds of Wat Phra That. As we saw in Chapter Three, the image of them standing in front of their junk ship is adored and frequently utilized by locals since the siblings are thought to be particularly invested in Nakhon and its residents. This also holds true for the images of them as Buddhas, which continue to be appreciated and utilized. In fact, it seems to be the case that their heroism and devotion was so great it was ultimately rewarded with Buddhahood.

In this chapter, I will also examine a third image, located in a small building (*vihara sam chom*) in the inner courtyard of Wat Phra That to the east of the principal *chedi*. The sitting image is lustrous with its golden sheen and fine, bejeweled accessories, including crown. It glances down at devotees who make offerings and requests in the space or seek their fortune by shaking a bamboo container, which fills the building with the familiar rattling of *siamsi* until a predictive, red, numbered stick, at last, falls from the cylinder. The image also offers protection

---

<sup>5</sup> Chiu 2017: 40-41

<sup>6</sup> In the *Dāthāvamsa*, the pair encounters two instances of *nāga* trying to steal the relic for their personal veneration. There is no mention of nefarious intentions of the ship’s crew (see Chapter Two and Appendix One).

to the ashes of former governors of Nakhon, which are now entombed in the building. Sitting in the position of subduing Mara, this Buddha is ornamented and serene behind its glass enclosure. But this image too has another identity, one resounding in the historical imagination of the town — it is King Asoke of Nakhon (*phra chao sri thammakarat* or *sri thammakok*).<sup>7</sup>

Based on the lack of primary source evidence, some scholars suggest the king is entirely legendary, but he is taken as a 12<sup>th</sup> century historical figure throughout the town, in its museums, its monuments, and in the minds of its residents.<sup>8</sup> Asoke’s significance should not be underestimated, however, since as Swearer reminds, “History records what has happened, and while myths and legends may have a relationship to a past history, their permanent significance lies in the fact that they transcend history [. . .] they give a commentary on what a people has held and holds to be of lasting value.”<sup>9</sup>



**Image 4.1:** King Asoke monument in Nakhon city center (photo by author)

---

<sup>7</sup> For the remainder of this chapter, when I will refer to King Asoke of Nakhon simply as “Asoke,” it should be read with the understanding that he is not to be confused with the famous Mauryan ruler and Buddhist patron of India.

<sup>8</sup> See Munro-Hay: 52-55

<sup>9</sup> Swearer 1976: 4

According to the local chronicles and historiography, Asoke founds the city,<sup>10</sup> heads the project that locates the 84,000 relics needed to fill the many *stūpa* constructed by King Aśoka of India, and then has Wat Phra That's great reliquary constructed.<sup>11</sup> In the city center, there is a standing image of King Asoke of Nakhon (here is he portrayed as a unenlightened royalty). The inscription accompanying the monument identifies this virtuous king as the founder and namesake of the kingdom of Nakhon Si Thammarat, creator of a system of government ethics based on Buddhist principles (*thamma racha*), and ruler of twelve subsidiary cities. The town's seal also honors this legacy, although indirectly, as it illustrates Wat Phra That's principal *chedi* surrounded by twelve animals, each representing one of the twelve territories the chronicles claim were once under Nakhon's control. Influentially, according to the inscription, it was Asoke "at the center of Buddhism" who had the central *chedi* at Wat Phra That constructed and established the Theravāda belief system in the region.<sup>12</sup> In fact, he is the reason, according to the inscription, Nakhon is known as the place of the virtuous king (*phra racha phu song thamma*). He is likewise identified as such in the city museum, where "King Si Thammasokarat" is shown in a portrait drawing as a strikingly handsome, symmetrical, full-browed monarch and is identified as "the first king of the Patamawong or Pathumwong dynasty."

---

<sup>10</sup> Wyatt identifies this monarch (Sri Thammasok I), called Phya Narapatirajaraja in Chronicle A, as King Narapatisithu of Pagan. According to the chronicles, as the people in the king's town suffered an epidemic, the king, along with his family and people, left to establish a new town. His scouts locate the crystalline beach, while a hunter finds a gem. After investigating the area, he sends four of his men to confer with the Lankan king, who grants his approval for the establishment of a new city and sends the necessary monks. Another epidemic forces the city to be established on a hill rather than the beach. And so it is in the year 1098 (1176-1177 AD) that Nakhon is founded, with the *chedi* constructed for the relic afterwards (Munro-Hay 2001: 282-283).

<sup>11</sup> The chronicles do not actually mention the relocation of the left eyetooth relic in this first mention of the reliquary's construction. It does arise, however, when this King Asoke of Nakhon locates the buried relic that is then divided into 84,000 pieces to be distributed into Aśoka of India's *stūpas* and of which one part is enshrined in the great *chedi* of Nakhon. A second King Asoke is said to have received the first cloth used in wrapping the Great Reliquary after it had washed ashore with a monk *en route* from Pegu to Lanka to present the cloth to the Buddha's footprint. See Munro-Hay 2001: 55-59 for possible historical interpretations of the chronicle tales.

<sup>12</sup> According to the chronicles, after the death to King Asoke II, his second brother, Chantrapanu I became Sri Thammasokarat III. There is also a King Sri Thammasok V mentioned in the Nakhon chronicles. According to Chronicle A, Sri Thammasok V, formerly Sri Racha, restored the Great Reliquary for the second time.

Within the nodal network at Wat Phra That, the King Asoke/Buddha image completes a material circuit between the two Hero(ine)/Buddha images and the Buddha relic; they are physical manifestations of the ongoing connection between the town's past, Buddhism, and contemporary veneration. These three images extend networks in time, space, narrative, and historiography. They delightfully confuse and push boundaries in the Theravāda imagination of what it means to be a (the) Buddha, while also showing how narratives extend beyond texts and stories expounded with words into the concrete world of contemporary Buddhist practice. And so, in this chapter, I explore some of the possible implications of the dual identities of these images, and more broadly the importance of flexibility, ambiguity, and duality within contemporary, Thai Buddhist worldviews. I begin by examining the dual nature of the late-Ayutthaya style of Buddha image used to portray the three figures, which presents the Buddha in royal dress with accouterment. Moving onto the specific images, I explore some possible implications of their multiple identities. In doing so, I examine how Hemachala and Thonthakuman's involvement with Nakhon does not simply end, as it does in the chronicle tale, when they return to Nakhon, bury half of the tooth relic on the beach, and erect a *chedi* over it; nor does Asoke's narrative end in the chronicle. Rather, I am proposing that they have all been (re)incarnated as Buddha images. This then can be understood as an implicit suggestion that they have achieved Buddhahood through their highly meritorious acts of safely delivering the tooth relic, or in the case of Asoke, constructing the great *chedi* and establishing Theravāda Buddhism in the region. In doing their part to secure the successful dispensation of the Buddhist *sāsana*, they too have attained the status of a Buddha. The image of Hemachala/Buddha is particularly striking as a female, non-ascetic heroine is re-embodied and reimagined as the Buddha him/herself. Rather than merely looking for feminine symbols or to the respected position of

mothers within the Theravāda tradition, for example, this image provides a female, Buddha icon, who continues to be venerated and exalted. To this day, all three legendary figures maintain a tutelary relationship with the town, its inhabitants, the monastery, and the Buddha relic. From the local chronicles to contemporary practice, they are warp and woof to the town's identity, and so too that of Wat Phra That.

### **The Wandering Ascetic in Royal Finery: A Prototype of Ambiguity and Duality**

The Thonthakuman/Buddha, Hemachala/Buddha, and Asoke/Buddha statues are all ornamented Buddha images (*phra chao song khrueng*)<sup>13</sup> in late-Ayutthaya style, and so are decorated with a crown and other royal accouterment.<sup>14</sup> The first two are standing, while the latter is seated. The Thonthakuman/Buddha image is has only the right hand extended forward, palm facing outward, while the left arm hangs by the side (*pang ham yat*). This gesture pronounces that relatives ought not fight; it is derived from a tale in which the Buddha once settled a quarrel over how irrigated water would be divided among family members.<sup>15</sup> The figure

---

<sup>13</sup> Images that are heavily ornamented and elaborately decorated are referred to as *song krueang yai*, and those with fewer decorations are *song krueang noi*. Dorothy Fickle provides a thick description of a sixteenth century Buddha image with “restrained” ornamentation (*song krueang noi*): “The Buddha is dressed in monastic garb which covers both shoulders. He performs the gesture of *abhayamudrā* with his right hand [ . . . ] His left hand hangs at the side, palm inward. His *ushnīsha* is concealed under a high-tiered conical cover topped with a jewel. This is combined with a wide diadem-like band decorated with gems and filigree, with flanges over the ears. This band covers the temples at the front and descends to the lower edge of the hair-line at the back. This style of crown is derived from the crowns of Hindu images produced at Sukhothai, which were probably modeled after the crowns of the king. The side flanges on the crown were an innovation during the Ayutthaya period [ . . . ] later crowned Buddhas of Ayutthaya added a wide necklace, a pectoral pendant or crossed bandoliers, a jeweled belt, armlets, anklets, and many other ornaments” (Fickle 1998: 76-78).

<sup>14</sup> The Ayutthaya period, as proposed by Priya Krairiksh in 1977 and revised in 1979, runs between the 14<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab's traditional periods indicate the Ayutthaya period as mid-14<sup>th</sup>- mid-18<sup>th</sup> century (ibid.: 18-19). The Asoke/Buddha is probably the newest and is from the late Ayutthaya to the early Rattanakosin period.

<sup>15</sup> According to Woodward, this episode features prominently enough in the Buddha's biography to be associated with such a common posture for two reasons. First, during his time at Uruvela, the Buddha performed some thirty-five hundred plus miracles, and this is the last. Thus, “it has strong overtones of victory.” Second, “the control of waters, in a rice-growing nation dependent for sustenance upon flooding waters and their control, resonates with the obligations of the king” (Woodward 2015: 54).

of Hemachala/Buddha in the rear of the chanting hall is in the posture of “forbidding the ocean” (*ham samut*), which may remind one of Nakhon’s connection to the sea.<sup>16</sup> Her/his arms are extended in front of their body and their palms face forward. According to Hiram Woodward, the story that gave rise to this gesture was popularized during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Cambodia and Thailand.<sup>17</sup> Over their concealed monastic robes, these images wear crowns, royal regalia, bangles on their arms and ankles, earrings, are ornamented with jewels, and since standing, they wear shoes that come to an upturned point. The ornamentation on this style of Buddha image has long intrigued scholars, who have tried to figure out how a mendicant, who had renounced his princely title, palaces, and possessions, could be portrayed in such elaborate garb.<sup>18</sup>

For our purposes, I will provide only a brief outline of the potential history of the crowned Buddha image as the style made its way to Thailand. From as early as the fifth century, in caves in western India, there are depictions of a crown being held by deities over the head of the Buddha. Then, beginning in the seventh century during the Pala period, crowned Buddha images appear frequently. It is also possible that Indian practitioners may have begun decorating

---

<sup>16</sup> Woodward notes that art historians refer to this posture as *abhaya mudra* (“the gesture of absence of fear”), which can be found in texts preserved in Nepal. However, according to Woodward, “it is doubtful that this name was ever in widespread use. ‘Forbidding the ocean’ must refer to an episode in the life of the Buddha, but the pose [. . .] may not have always been known by this name.” Additionally, Woodward notes that the terminology is odd, since in Thai, *ham* (“Don’t” or “No”) is colloquial and not typically used in the higher vocabulary reserved for Buddhas (e.g., it is used on “No Smoking” signs, or those that indicate one may not apply gold fleck to an object). *Ham man* (“forbidding Mara”) is also a popular hand gesture. *Samut* is appropriate in the language hierarchy, but it does indeed seem “hyperbolic in the context,” and also is absent from the narrative telling (Woodward 2005: 54).

<sup>17</sup> As the tale behind the gesture goes, during the Buddha’s first year of delivering sermons after his enlightenment, he was staying at Uruvela with a matted-hair ascetic, Kassapa, who himself had five hundred followers. While there, the Buddha spends a night in a fire hut occupied by a feared and ferocious *nāga*. In the morning, he emerges from the hut carrying his alms bowl, which now harbors the coiled, docile serpent. At some point after this impressive feat, the large group of ascetics, ignoring the inclement, cold weather decides to bathe in the nearby river. The horde of ascetics emerges from water freezing, at which time the Buddha provides individual fires by which they may warm themselves. Next, out of season, it begins raining and so the lands flood. While the others clamored to boats, through the force of his mental prowess, the Buddha maintains a plot of land around himself so dry that it becomes dusty. Kassapa is in awe as he witnesses this from his boat. Impressed by these feats, he goes on to enter the Middle Way with his hundreds of disciples and then becomes an *arhant*.

<sup>18</sup> For specifics on the variety of Ayutthaya-style crowned Buddha images see: McGill 1997: 238-247.

ordinary Buddha images with offerings of jewelry (as Xuanzang purports to have observed).<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the practice of offering jewelry to an image or the monastery is still extremely common at Wat Phra That, where the gift display room holds cases of, for example, rings, bracelets, belts, and hair pins made from fine metals. Around 1000 AD, in Northern India, the image of the crowned Buddha gained widespread popularity, “a result of the increasing domination of esoteric practices.” There, the story went that during his enlightenment the Buddha had “miraculously ascended into space” and “received a crown initiation by cosmic Buddhas.” For those practitioners, this indicated that the Buddha’s enlightenment was one “in appearance but not reality,” and so “provided a justification for ritual coronations practiced by esoteric Buddhists.” Both these “esoteric practices”<sup>20</sup> and images spread to Cambodia during the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>21</sup> These

---

<sup>19</sup> Fickle 1998: 38. Fickle writes, “The Mahāyānists and Vajrayānists, who worshipped side by side with the Hīnayānists in the same monasteries, may for special ceremonies have added ornaments to an existing image used by the earlier faith. Or perhaps the ornaments were applied merely to show respect to the image. Or again, crowning and decorating an image may have related to the Mahāyānist idea of the Buddha as a *chakravartin*, a universal emperor, reigning in glory over the universe. A crowned and decorated Buddha might also represent Vajradhara or Vajrasattva, emanations of the supreme Buddha of the Vajrayānists, the Adi-Buddha. The five great regional Buddhas of the Mahāyānists—the Tathāgatas—are also sometimes depicted in a decorated form. However, these are usually seated and perform specific hand gestures which help identify them” (ibid.: 39-40).

<sup>20</sup> Scholars of Southeast Asia have examined so-called “esoteric Theravāda,” “Tantric Theravāda,” “Vajrayāna,” or the “*yogāvacara*” genre of texts and practices. Texts in this genre include, for example, the *Ratanamālā*, the *Saddavimāla*, the *Gavampati Sutta*, a group of texts called the *Mūl kammaṭṭāna*, *Dhammaviṅsun*, *Paṅsukūl* genre, the *Dhammakāya*, and those on *yantras* (McDaniel 2011: 101). McDaniel cautions that the terms esoteric, tantric, and *yogāvacara* are terms most Thai practitioners would not use, and that the terms are simultaneously too narrow and too broad — they conjure thoughts of Tibet, Chinese *mijiao*, or Japanese Shingon, or they invoke the general idea of a broad range of practices by Hindus and Buddhists. The Thai texts contain no suggestion of the transgressive practices generally associated with tantric Buddhism — there is no sex, there are no buddhas residing in vaginas, and no invitations for the occupation of deities, for example. While in Thailand there is certainly meditation in charnel grounds and some collection of “corpse oil,” there is no use of skull bowls, or the consumption of liquor, blood, etc. Furthermore, access to these texts typically requires no initiation (although Bizot suggests some initiation may have occurred in Cambodia (Crosby 2000: 11)) and practices do not occur on the margins of society — they even occur among the urban, elite, and in royal monasteries. In fact, ghosts, deities, Buddhas and arahats of the past, protective texts and incantations, and famous dead monks are “not only common but perhaps also the dominant form of daily liturgy and practice in most of Thailand” (McDaniel 2011: 100-106). Crosby writes, “the varied practices and insights advocated for the *yogāvacara* can no longer be regarded as isolated anomalies. They mount up to a coherent and full religious system, a system that may well have been the Great tradition of Theravāda before the modern period” (Crosby 2000: 190). In sum, Crosby argues for the prevalence (and perhaps dominance) before the modern period; McDaniel extends this dominance to contemporary texts and practices.

images of the Awakened One portrayed him either seated under a *nāga*, or standing, wearing a crown and royal ornaments.<sup>22</sup> From there, the style finds its way westward, where the earliest known images of crowned Buddhas in modern day Thailand appear on lintels at Wat Phimai, a “Vajrayāya” Khmer Buddhist monastery in Nakhon Ratchasima Province in the Northeast. The temple is dated via inscription to 1108 AD, and thus falls within the “Early Angkor style of Khmer art” (a period lasting from about 1100 AD -1150AD).<sup>23</sup> By the mid-12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, crowned Buddha images were common in Cambodia and spread to Angkor’s western

---

These texts include as “distinctive features” the topic of fetal development, meditation directives which vary from the more classic interpretations found in the *Visuddhimagga*, and the utilization of the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* in a various ways (ibid.: 142). Still today, they provide a “technical foundation” for much Thai Buddhist practice by making connections between the body, the body of the Buddha, divisions of time, and Pali texts and alphabet. They also use “heart syllables” and longer incantations to represent larger phenomena, while multiple syllables are often used to represent grouped items of the same number. This results in “an algebraic system that seeks to manipulate a series of knowns in order to control or uncover a wide variety of unknowns,” thereby, connecting the “macro- and micro-cosmic worlds.” To be clear, this is not a “symbolic” system, since the texts, drawings, etc. are believed to directly create protection, or act on certain events when they are preformed, tattooed, or chanted correctly; “These equations do things. They solve problems” (McDaniel 2011:103). According to Bizot, *na mo bu (d)dhā ya* are the most commonly found syllables in *yogāvacara* texts, and the syllables are frequently “placed in parallel to all groups of five constituents, such as the five Buddhas, the five *khandha* (‘aggregates’)” (Crosby 200: 147). Likewise, Swearer says these five syllables also represent the “five aggregates of bodily existence [*khandā*], the combined qualities of mother, father, Buddha, dharma and saṅgha, and the five buddhas beginning with Kakusandha and ending with Metteyya (Maitreya)” (Swearer 1995: 337-338).

The tantric and esoteric Buddhisms of elsewhere in Asia, do not map neatly onto the *yogāvacara* tradition in Southeast Asia. Christian Wedemeyer writes about Tibet, “Tantric Buddhism comprehends those forms of esoteric Buddhism that are non-dualist in their conceptualization of ritual purity and pollution and are, accordingly, antinomian or transgressive in their ritual praxis and scriptural discourses.” Esoteric Buddhism includes “a variety of different sub-movements and doctrinal and ritual innovations within (primarily Mahāyāna, or bodhisattva-oriented) Buddhism” that have existed since the early to mid-first century. As the larger set under which Tantric Buddhism is subsumed, esoteric Buddhism requires rituals for special initiation that allow one to participate in the designated practice. This, of course, is to the exclusion of those who are not thus authorized. In esoteric Buddhism, a focus is maintained on the pure and impure, the dualism between divine and practitioner, as well as on collapsing these distinctions (Wedemeyer 2012: 14-15).

On the genre in Southeast Asia, for example, see: Bizot (1976), Bizot and Lagirarde (1996), Bizot and von Hinüber (1994), Olivier de Bernon (2000), Catherine Becchetti (1991), and Donald Swearer (1995). Kate Crosby and Justin McDaniel have expanded, quite significantly, on these earlier studies. See Crosby (2000) for an thorough annotated bibliography on the relevant works of Bizot, as well as Crosby (2013). See also: McDaniel (2008, 2009 and 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Woodward 2005: 55

<sup>22</sup> Fickle 1998: 38. Fickle, like others, calls these “princely ornaments,” presumably referring to the time Siddhartha spent as prince. I have chosen the more broad “royal ornament,” since images of this genre may also represent kings, princes, and princesses.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.* The art historical particularities of the origin of this style are beyond the scope of this paper. However, Fickle notes the similarities to “Mon prototype,” and the importation of “Khmer Hindu imagery” (*ibid.*: 38-39).

provinces, including to Lopburi in central Thailand.<sup>24</sup> Around 1300, the kingdom of Sukhothai phased out the images of the Buddha in royal attire, but they reappear late in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, revived possibly in the Lanna kingdom of Northern Thailand.<sup>25</sup> In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, images of the crowned Buddha became popular in Ayutthaya alongside the *Jambupatisutta*.<sup>26</sup> Woodward argues both the images and this tale connote victory, and thus were considered “viable substitutes for the standard victory-over-Mara image.” As we saw in Chapter Three, effort breeds merit. And so, since these images were often bedazzled with expensive jewels, called for more metal than ones in simple robes, and required additional time to make, extra merit could be generated through their construction.<sup>27</sup>

Unsurprisingly, before many pages of ink were spilled over the development and history of this intriguing artistic decision, the decorated Buddha puzzled others. How could the Wandering Ascetic, having renounced all worldly possessions and instructed others to do the same, be wearing not only a crown, but also jewels, extravagant shoes, a belt, and other lavish adornments?<sup>28</sup> Sri Lankan ambassadors, visiting Ayutthaya in 1756, were indeed inquisitive. Their hosts replied to their curiosity with a copy of the *Jambupativatthu, or Jambupatisutta*, and suggested it be given to their king so that he too may be inspired to begin creating similar images. In this story, the Buddha is dwelling at Veluvana monastery. While there, King

---

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*: 41

<sup>25</sup> Woodward 2005: 55. Lanna roughly corresponds to nine current provinces comprising modern day northern Thailand (Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Mae Hong Song, Phayao, Phitsanalok, Phrae, Tak and Nan). It is the name of the aggregate of city-states that occupied the area, from about 1300-1900 CE. After 1900, all principalities were incorporated in the central administration of the Siamese state (Penth 2004: vii-viii).

<sup>26</sup> An inscription at Wat Phimai mentions the deity Trailokyavijaya, and so local Buddhists appear to have been familiar with the story of the conversion of Shiva, which according to Woodward, may have served as a model for the conversion story of Jambupati (*ibid.*: 55).

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*: 56. Rama I (r. 1782-1809) had a pair of standing images in royal attire commissioned. One was dedicated to his father, while the other was dedicated on his behalf.

<sup>28</sup> In Burma, images of Maitreya, the future Buddha waiting in heaven, somewhat overlap with these ornamented Buddha images (*ibid.*: 55).

Jambupati, who possessed magical powers, challenged a patron of the Buddha, King Bimbisara. Not to be outdone, the Buddha appeared as a great king in an elaborate city created by his supernatural abilities, dressed in extravagant finery and accessories, and sent the god Indra to summon Jambupati. Understandably humbled and impressed with the display, Jambupati is able to aptly receive the *dhamma* and embarks on the Buddhist path as a monk.<sup>29</sup> The tale apparently did not capture the imagination of Lankans as it did to those on the other side of the Bay of Bengal, as these types of images do not appear in Sri Lanka. In any case, regarding Thailand, scholars most commonly offer this story as the inspiration for the crowned Buddha image design, as this explanation eliminates the contradiction otherwise apparent in depicting the Wandering Ascetic in princely garb. As will be seen below, however, in Nakhon, this is not the most popular contemporary explanation of the three images being discussed here.

Dorothy Fickle argues this style of image spread out from Pimai but that the choice is likely indicative of “no deeper meaning than as a way of honoring the Buddha.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Venerable Kandarapanguwe Dhammasiri writes, “Probably the sculpture wanted to respect the teacher with his highest ability,” adding “ornaments given to the Buddha image may be an attempt to copy Hindu images,” and that “it may be the influence of Cambodian art” that emerged from the Jayavarman VII period. Thus, for him, the images are a result of Hindu and Cambodian “influence” that inspired a particular way of showing devotion to the Buddha. J.A.

---

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*: 54-55. It is possible that this story originated in Lan Na around the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when Pali scholars were composing new, original narratives. Thus, “it is plausible to think that one of them wrote the *Jambupatisutta*. A more-or-less underground tradition must have provided links to twelfth- and thirteenth-century beliefs, but these connections are tenuous at best” (*ibid.*: 55-56).

<sup>30</sup> Fickle 1998: 41. Fickle here is addressing the spread of the image design throughout Thailand, which she claims are merely a way to honor the Buddha. The Pimai reliefs, on the other hand, may be “a representation of the Buddha as a *ravartin*—a universal emperor—a role which is attested in Khmer epigraphy.” Woodward suggest that the crowned images there could be “expressing the martial powers of the central Buddha of the temple, which was almost certainly a Buddha protected by a naga who represented the Supreme Buddha” (*ibid.*: 40-41). The crowned Buddha image was more readily accepted as fitting in with Mahayanist or Vajrayanist concepts. When the image spreads throughout Thailand and its Theravāda Buddha, scholars become more perplexed.

Learsch says the regalia can be justified by the Buddha's "having attained moral superiority over all other beings," as well as from the idea that he was destined to achieve either Buddhahood or to become a righteous king.<sup>31</sup> This seems particularly dissatisfying since it is unclear why "moral superiority" would garner more ornaments, and Siddhartha did not go on to become a righteous king but an ascetic. Woodward offers a more creative interpretation based on an image sequence at Wat Phra Si Sanphet, in which a single, crowned Buddha image could be interpreted as Maitreya, the next Buddha. He is reminded of a wall painting at Ajanta, where this is the case, and thus suggests, "It might then follow that the crowned standing images of the mid-sixteenth century had a memorial or commemorative function associated with individuals, and were perhaps emblems of a hoped-for future condition."<sup>32</sup> Since all three figures at Wat Phra That are highly revered, this is certainly one plausible explanation for the dual identity of the images. That is, perhaps it was believed that in materially manifesting them as Buddhas, the possibility of this as a future achievement would be increased. The craftsmen and donors behind these images would then meritoriously be contributing to the Buddhist *sāsana* while personally helping these beloved figures.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Ven. Kandarapanguwe Dhammasiri 1991: 58; see also: Learsch 1969: 8.

<sup>32</sup> Woodward 1997: 233

<sup>33</sup> Another theory is perhaps worth suggesting: that is, the possibility that Buddha images in Thailand come to be modeled after the kings of the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries (i.e., the king functioned as a model for the Buddha, rather than the Buddha being reimagined as a king). According to Woodward, an "increased elaboration of, and the increased role of, the crowned Buddha" coincided with a "rise of absolutism" beginning with King Naresuan (r. 1590 - 1605) and continuing through the reign of Phra Narai (r. 1656 - 1688). This period was marked by a "concentration of power at the court, a decrease in the independence of nobles, the termination of the ceramic industries (and, presumably the decline of formerly wealthy traders): all this also suggests a growth in the degree of artistic uniformity, and a lessening of the variety that was characteristic of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries." This period also coincided with an increased role of Europeans. (See *ibid.*: 235-239). With all of this in mind, it is perhaps worth considering that these kings would have envisioned themselves as Buddhas (as Jayavarman VII likely did in some way). Additionally, it seems reasonable to imagine that one way these kings worked to help solidify their power was by encouraging the association between themselves and the Buddha - a blurring of identities, which necessitated that the king receive respect, equal to that of the Buddha, as he embodied equal power and wisdom.

As time marches forward, images gain more possibilities in their ongoing lives. Thus, moving away from art historical analyses, we can look at the multiple and personalized interpretations available to those interacting with the specific images being discussed here. To do so, I am suggesting we take seriously the importance of opacity. With the viewing of certain imagery or statuary, ambiguity allows for the interplay between the specific and the generic, between a particular character and Gotama Buddha, as well as between individuals and the category of Buddhas in general. As Gregory Levine has so aptly demonstrated, with some images there is the “potential for multiple visual and rhetorical objectives to be at play [. . .] rather than a simple assertion of likeness or denial of representation and resemblance.”<sup>34</sup> At Wat Phra That, this ambiguity is apparent as multiple identities are attributed to a single image.

A type of indistinctness, relatively similar to what we are discussing here, has been extensively examined in relation to Khmer statuary, where multiple identities in a single figure are readily apparent.<sup>35</sup> For example, George Cœdès has found that the “great majority” of statues of Viśhnu and Śiva were also “portraits of kings and princes and high dignitaries, each represented as the god into whom he would be absorbed at the end of his earthly existence.” This inherent duality is also apparent in the names of the statues, which are typically a composite of the names of the god and the man, indicating, “clearly that men were worshipped as gods.”<sup>36</sup> Perhaps the most famous example of an image playing on multiple identities is at the Bayon Temple Complex, the “symbolic center” of Jayavarman VII’s kingdom and the former center of the city of Angkor Thom. There, the stone faces looking out in all directions are simultaneously, it

---

<sup>34</sup> Levine 2005: 9

<sup>35</sup> According to Ashley Thompson, statues of gods are easily recognizable through “a well-defined Indian iconographic canon.” Typically, the images would be named by combining the name of the god with the name of the person being honored. Further, “It has also been suggested that upon death the individuals mortal remains (ashes, bones, jewelry) were in one way or another incorporated into the statue. In these ways, the statues, actually representing the god, would in some sense have been personalized” (Thompson 2007: 182).

<sup>36</sup> Cœdès 1963: 22

is suggested, “a portrait — faithful or not, physical or metaphysical — of the king,”<sup>37</sup> as well as perhaps, the Buddha.<sup>38</sup> Following Coedès’ claim that “We can hardly doubt that Jayavarman VII looked on himself as a living Buddha [. . .]”<sup>39</sup>, Woodward writes, “It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the king wished to associate himself with the Buddha in some way when he honoured his mother as the Perfection of Wisdom (the goddess Prajñāpāramitā) at one temple, his father as Lokeśvara (embodiment of compassion) at another, since wisdom and compassion together bring about Buddha-hood.”<sup>40</sup> In this vein, Coedès refers to the large Buddha seated under a *nāga*, thought to have once been the central image at Bayon, as a “Buddharaja,” and the “Buddhist substitute for the former Devaraja, or god-king, of earlier reigns.”<sup>41</sup> Other examples of “portrait statues of Jayavarman VII, represented with the attributes of the Buddha” have been found throughout the country. Their names begin with the prefix “Jaya” (victory) and continue with “mahanatha” (great savior); the former was another name for Jayavarman VII and the latter was applicable to the king who defeated the Chams.<sup>42</sup> So, in Cambodia, we find examples of images of Buddha-kings, some with names to solidify the connection between the two.

Following this line of thinking and borrowing Coedès’ terminology, it is possible that the image of Asoke/Buddha can be seen as an example of a quasi-historical “Buddharaja.” Rather than the king granting this status to himself, after his rule, devotees do. This Buddha/Asoke image is easily contrasted with the King Asoka monument in the city center. In the latter, he is

---

<sup>37</sup> Thompson 2007: 193

<sup>38</sup> Coedès 1968: 173–175

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*: 98

<sup>40</sup> Woodward 2001: 250-251. Woodward notes that the shift from Mahāyāna to Theravāda likely happened during the king’s lifetime, thus shifting the worldview from one where “Buddha-hood was an imminent possibility” to one in which this was no longer the case. In portrait images from late in his life, he is shown worshipping the Buddha and “receiving a prediction — in accordance with Burmese thinking — as to when in the future he will become a Buddha” (*ibid.*: 251).

<sup>41</sup> Coedès 1963: 98-100 (Cited in Woodward 2001: 250)

<sup>42</sup> Coedès 1963: 99

easily identifiable as the ancient king, an unenlightened human devoted to Buddhism and so holding a palm-leaf manuscript. Another image of King Asoke is found in the rear courtyard, on a raised platform near to the images of Hemachala and Thonthakuman standing in front of a junk ship, and next to an image of the legendary Lady White Blood. Here, Asoke is in royal garb, seated, with a sword across his lap; he is depicted merely as a king. The monument, the image in the rear courtyard, and the Asoke/Buddha image all bear the same name on their accompanying placards: *phra chao sri dhammasokarat*. Like the city center monument, King Thaksin's image at Wat Phra That also portrays him as a worldly king of his time. Both those images are worthy of veneration and able to offer assistance to practitioners, but they do not denote an enlightened Buddha.



**Image 4.2:** King Asoke of Nakhon/Buddha (photo by author)

Asoke is arguably the most important king for the town, monastery and Buddhism in the historiographical imagination of Nakhon residents. Importantly, with the golden Asoke/Buddha image at Wat Phra That, a secular *dhammaraja* (leader of the people, an unenlightened king) is not only tied to, but is actually conflated with the Buddha (master of the *dhamma*, enlightened leader). As such, in contemporary practice, the image's identity is malleable and can be viewed in accordance with the devotees' perspective and prerogative — it can be, for example, Gotama Buddha (as he appears in the *Jambupattisutta* or elsewhere in his biography), a Buddha (Asoke after he has already or inevitably will achieve his inevitable fate), and/or King Asoke, the founder of the city and now protector of its ancestors and town's folk. That is, one may employ the general categories of “Buddha image” or “*dhammaraja*,” or alternatively (or simultaneously) identify the image with its namesake. Like the image of Phra Kacchayana, local women may petition the Asoke/Buddha for assistance in fertility; his *vihara* displays pictures of infants conceived through his intervention (although, to be sure, not nearly as many as are credited to Phra Kacchayana). Adding to the royal persona of the image is the fact that the Asoke/Buddha image is charged with protecting the interned ashes of members of the royal family from Nakhon (*phra ratchawong*), the ashes of local commoners (*bukkon*) who are descendants of Nakhon royalty, and the ashes of ordinary locals. These local generational and familial connections bring to mind the importance of King Asoke's connections to the town and serve to remind the viewer that the image is also that of their former king.

On the other hand, the viewer sees the image is also that of Gotama Buddha in the posture of subduing Mara. This emphasis on the historical Buddha's enlightenment is found elsewhere in the Asoke/Buddha's immediate network. As one enters this building, to the left of the door, is small alcove in the building containing an image of Mae Thorani drowning Mara and

his army. Visitors often stop to venerate this image before entering the small *vihara*. Like the posture of principal image, this too recalls the Buddha's famous defeat of the army of Delusion that sought to disrupt his enlightenment. Further, when looking at the Asoke/Buddha image, one sees on the back wall a golden relief of Siddhartha cutting off his long hair after fleeing his palace (*phra puttha ong songok pha nuat*), drawing attention to and specifically highlighting that image is borne from the story of the former prince, Siddhartha.

The placard describing this building directs the readers attention to precisely these three images: *Mae Thorani*, *Phra Chao Sri Thammakarat*, and *Phra Putthaong Songok Pha Nuat* — a goddess, a king, and the Buddha setting out on his quest, respectively. With all of this in mind, in this frame, we have ambiguity as to who and what the Asoke/Buddha is and represents: it is at once an Ayutthayan-style Buddha, a legendary king, and finally, a legendary king reimagined as a Buddha — the final stage for one so devoted to Buddhism and the town. In other words, we see a “Buddharaja,” a king that has become a Buddha, but also a Buddha that remains a king.

### **A Hero and a Heroine become Buddhas**

To take seriously the name of something is to consider why it was specifically chosen and what that choice may reveal about the people, time, and place when the name was given. When Siddhartha Gotama attained enlightenment, he procured a new title, a new name; he became Gotama Buddha, the Awakened One, the enlightened, wheel-turning bearer of the *dhamma*. As is the case with others, this procurement of another name marked a significant transformation in the Buddha's life and societal position. Continuing throughout the course of his forty-year preaching career he would be assigned many other epithets indicating his various

superlative traits and accomplishments.<sup>43</sup> A name also may provide inspiration for the future, a clue hinting at possibilities. In this vein, I suggest that the naming of an image or referring to an image by a particular name may also offer the chance to subtly challenge norms and dominate power structures, as is the case with the Hemachala/Buddha statue.

In Thailand, it is quite common for large or principal Buddha images to be given proper names, although not all are.<sup>44</sup> Buddha image names may include epithets of the Buddha from Pali texts, the materials used to construct the image, and sometimes even the size of the image.<sup>45</sup> They may also include the name of the monastery where the image is housed. While most names are formal, some begin with the informal “*luang pho*” meaning “Honored (or Royal) Father.”<sup>46</sup> Formal names begin with “*phra*” from the Sanskrit and Pali “*vara*” meaning “excellent” and “noble,” or “boon” and “blessing.” The phrase “*phraphutthachao*” means “Venerable Master Buddha,” and may be used for an image of the Buddha or a symbol for him. While *chao* means prince or ruler, it also functions as an honorific suffix for highly revered or venerated figures. For example, the principal Buddha image in the Ordination Hall at Wat Phra That is named “*phra sri sakyamuni sri thammarat*.” Sakyamuni is a common epithet for the Buddha, meaning “of the Sakya clan.” Thus, out of context one could read this as “Venerable Sakyamuni Revered Ruler of the Dhamma.” Since the image is enshrined at Wat Phra That in Nakhon, it also means “Venerable Sakyamuni of [Nakhon] Si Thammarat.” Much less frequently, Buddha images are named after specific people, as is the case with the three images being examined here.

---

<sup>43</sup> For example, some epithets of the Buddha praising his spiritual attainments include, in Pali: *bhagavat* (awakened one), *samma-sambuddha* (fully awakened one), *tathāgatha* (thus gone one), *sugata* (well gone one). He is also lauded via epithets for his masculinity as the following examples indicate: *narottama* (best of men), *narāsabha* and *purisa-usabha* (bull of a man), *nara-vīra* (hero man), *dhamma-rāja* (king of dhamma), *purisājañña* (stallion of a man), *mahāpurisa* (great man), *nara-sīha* and *purisa-sīha* (man-lion), *purisottama* (ultimate man), *sappurisa* (true man), *purisa-bhava* (virile) (Powers 2009: 241-243).

<sup>44</sup> See: Thatsanasuwan (1982) in which the author describes sixty-two Buddha images throughout Thailand.

<sup>45</sup> Srisuchat 2012: 42

<sup>46</sup> Woodward 2005: 47-48

Duality and ambiguity, which can plausibly be understood as intentional by those originally assigning the name, can also be seen in discrepancies in how the images are labeled in printed materials about Wat Phra That. For example, one book about the monastery, advocating for its relegation as a World Heritage Site, offers photos of “*phra phuttha rup chao chai phra thonthakuman*,” or a “Buddha image [of/named] Prince Thonthakuman” or “Prince Thonthakuman’s Buddha image.”<sup>47</sup> Another text reads, “*phra phuttarup thaen ong jao chai thonthakuman*” or a “Buddha image representing Prince Thonthakuman.” Similarly, the image of Hemachala/Buddha is labeled “*phra phuttarup thaen ong jao ying hemachala*” (“Buddha image representing Princess Hemachala”).<sup>48</sup> In a publication on the monastery written by its abbot in 1992 there are pictures of the three images being discussed here. They are explicitly labeled: *chaochai thonthakuman* (Prince Thonthakuman), *chaoying hemachala* (Princess Hemachala), and *phrachao srithammasokarat* (King Asoka).<sup>49</sup> In this case, they are not labeled explicitly as Buddha images.

Contemporarily, practitioners comfortably accept the notion of multiple identities inhabiting one material figure (i.e., the images are both Buddha and another), and each figure can be referred to by the name of their legendary forbearer and/or an image of the Buddha. Thus, the images become these legendary figures in more than just name as they are enlivened by devotees and their continual remembering. Importantly, and absent from art historical analysis on the ornamented Buddha image style, is the fact that most contemporary devotees do not mention the

---

<sup>47</sup> See Kirdsiri (no page numbers provided). This text provides brief English translations for some items. For this image it reads “Prince DonDa’s Kumara’s Buddha Image.”

<sup>48</sup> *thi raluek ngan phraratchathan ploeng sop khun po pluen wutsak*: 121-122

<sup>49</sup> Ven. Rachawinaiwet: 5

*Jambupatisutta*.<sup>50</sup> Rather, I sometimes heard the image was “the Buddha as a prince.” Taking this explanation seriously, we see the lack of concern in the conflation of timelines; since the Buddha renounced his princely status in order to embark on the path of an ascetic, the idea of him, the Buddha, simultaneously as a prince is contradictory. On the other hand, visitors did not necessarily know the royal finery was covering robes, and so believed the image was actually that of Prince Sakyamuni before becoming the Buddha (i.e., rather than Gotama as Buddha in princely garb). This explanation makes perfect sense, since Gotama is often depicted before his enlightenment (e.g., when he is shown with his ribs protruding and his waist narrowed as a gaunt follower strict asceticism). Additionally, I was explicitly told multiple times that the image of Thonthakuman/Buddha was both the Buddha and Prince Thonthakuman. My expressed confusion did not resonate with these visitors, who were comfortable with a single image embodying multiple personas and stories; a Buddha image can portray the Buddha during his time as a prince, and Thonthakuman could conceivably be imagined as a Buddha.



**Image 4.3:** Thonthakuman/Buddha (photo by author)

---

<sup>50</sup> In fact, I never heard this as an explanation. However, I imagine some practitioners I did not meet would know this story and provide this as an explanation.

Moreover, when these images are viewed with their duality in mind, the local chronicle heroes of Thonthakuman, Hemachala, and King Asoka of Nakhon are imaginatively connected to three different times: 1) as an image of the Buddha they imaginatively extend *back* to the time of the historical Gotama (i.e., before his *parinibbāna*, cremation, and the appearance of his relics); 2) as local historical figures, they are remembered as they were during the time of their narratives, when they possess their names and perform their heroism; 3) with their duality, the timeline is extended *forward* beyond their chronicles, when they have become Buddhas in their own right, in a sense, through their meritorious action. This diachronic complexity extends their narratives, while also providing a type of ending to the story of its characters. The duality between Buddha/hero(ine) or Buddha/king is further complicated by the fact that there is only one historical Buddha (at least that this statuary would be referencing). Unlike gods, who may appear repeatedly in various forms, the Buddha (at least in the Theravāda imagination) did not take various forms and, in any case, has since exited the rounds of rebirth.

The artist(s) who created the image of Hemachala/Buddha is not known (as is the case with most Buddhist images and murals in Thailand), nor is the original giver of the name. The absence of inscriptional evidence compounds this problem. It is possible, in any case, to imagine that identifying a Buddha image as a particular female heroine was known to be at a minimum unique; more boldly, perhaps it was intended to provide inspiration to the many devoted female patrons. Taking this further, it could have been considered a subtle rebellious, revolutionary act against a male dominant power structure, both at the state and ecclesiastical levels. Unearthing the intentions of anyone is difficult and attempting to do so for an unknown entity (or entities) is nearly impossible. What we have available however, is contemporary evidence that this Hemachala/Buddha statue, bearing the name of a locally important, lay Buddhist woman, is

unique within the context of Thai Buddhist images. Moreover, the image remains inspirational to contemporary devotees, especially women, and serves as concrete evidence of a fissure in the male-dominated Theravāda iconography. Here, it is not a mere feminine symbol that has emerged, but in fact, a female Buddha herself. I am unaware of any other examples of like this in Thailand, although the possibility of their existence should not be excluded.

Michel de Certeau has argued that even when constrained by society and collective norms, people maintain elements of freedom in their choices, buck established rules and exercise agency. While society instills (or attempts to instill) particular motivations and values in its members through means eluding immediate recognition, de Certeau shows that it is still possible to resist and thereby alter the imposed norms. To this end and to explain how people interact with their surroundings, he introduces the theory of the “practice of everyday life,” which demonstrates how people utilize tactics to individualize their action and subvert the dominant sociopolitical or economic order. As such, de Certeau argues that while working within given systems, individuals are able to satisfy their own needs and manipulate situations for their benefit by making decisions, small and creative acts of resistance, that subvert the “rules of the game.” As “bricoleurs,” those in a subordinate position within the dominant cultural system craft countless and infinitesimal changes to adapt things to their own desires, therefore enacting their agency within a collective. This is done, for example, in reading, talking, walking, cooking, and shopping. For our purposes, we may add in assigning and/or using chosen names. In sum, de Certeau argues that people make autonomous decisions within systems of imposed constraint. Tactics are creative, albeit often infinitesimal acts, and thus dominated people still have freedom and opportunity. Thus, through the consumption of commodities and individual engagements

with spaces, people utilize their surroundings and adapt them to their own goals. Interactions with material culture provide opportunity.

In de Ceteau’s theory, “strategies” are utilized by those with organizational or institutional power and control (e.g., the state or a dominant ecclesiastical order), and delineate distinct, separate spaces (e.g., competitors, clients, “scientific rationality,” and we may add conventions within the monastic spaces and those of image naming), which can then be regulated. Importantly, those in control attempt to predict outcomes, but the very unpredictability of time and space undermines this objective. Therefore, strategies are inherently contradictory, since control is never perfect, and the spaces in which they are enacted are always changing and inhabited by users, leaving room for the implementation of strategies.



**Image 4.4:** Hemachala/Buddha (photo by author)

I am arguing that in the naming of the Hemachala/Buddha image and in the choice to retain, repeat, and republish this image's name as "Hemachala," we are privy to one of these seemingly minute, but significant choices that eschews the dominate structure and creates the possibility for a female Buddha heroine. Or, following Woodward, at the very least devotees created the image with the hope that Hemachala could eventually achieve the status as Buddha. This resistance is not only conceptual, since the image occupies a physical space at Wat Phra That and is regularly visited by devotees who reaffirm the name and the importance of the image in the nodal network. This in turn allows contemporary women to actively cultivate Buddhist virtues and creative ideals in a unique way.

In the Theravāda literary tradition, scholars have tended to look for "feminine" symbols and clues, as a way to validate or elevate the position of women within the literary tradition, written by, for, and mostly about men.<sup>51</sup> As John Powers writes, "Women were largely subverted in Buddhist texts and relegated to the periphery of concern of most traditional authors, sometimes situated as negative others to valorized male heroes or omitted altogether."<sup>52</sup> However, Kate Crosby, for example, argues that by looking at Theravāda material from the earliest, medieval and pre-modern periods, one finds a "greater range of the appropriation of the feminine and androgynous symbols within Theravāda soteriology and cosmography than previously observed."<sup>53</sup> Notably, she identifies an emphasis on the equal importance of compassion to wisdom in achieving Buddhahood, the "essentially feminine nature of the

---

<sup>51</sup> According to Kate Crosby, Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist sources have been "more productive" than those in the Theravāda tradition for creating "modern feminist readings." This is due in part to the tendency of those within or studying the former traditions to draw from a much larger corpus of texts spanning many centuries, while those in the Theravāda tradition tend to rely primarily on a relatively small selection of texts from the Pali canon, even as the tradition has continually evolved.

<sup>52</sup> Powers 2009: x. Powers is examining Buddhist literature of India that was composed between the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE and the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD.

<sup>53</sup> Crosby 2008: 34

*brahmavihara*,” and myths that suggest both female and male features are present in all people (borne out in contemporary practice through the honoring of the mother and the father via religious rites of passage<sup>54</sup>). A limitation Crosby notes about her findings is that the “positive symbols” highlighting the feminine or gender-inclusivity she locates are all based in the “protective nurturing and procreation” aspects of motherhood.<sup>55</sup> That is, the compassionate demeanor and capacity for creative reproduction that mothers embody are reflections, “particularly from the male perspective,” on a woman’s role in society.<sup>56</sup> Going further, Jonathan Walters argues that as discussed in the *Apadāna* of the Pali canon, the Buddha’s aunt, Gotamī Mahāpajāpatī, “functions as a female Buddha.” She is not treated as less capable, but rather as “being on a par with Gotama Buddha and in some ways preceding him.” She attains enlightenment (i.e., arhantship), teaches, and at her *parinibbāna* earthquakes resound, as they do during the Buddha’s.<sup>57</sup>

In less charitable readings, notably that by Liz Wilson, scholars have identified common Buddhist literary tropes in which women are merely meditative objects for men (even elderly ones) who must overcome their seductive charms and figures to attain enlightenment, primarily exist for the purpose of helping mediate *nirvana* for men, or act only as secondary characters.<sup>58</sup> Hemachala as a literary character and as embodied in her Buddha statues defies these tropes.

---

<sup>54</sup> In Southeast Asia, the merit gained during lower ordination (around the age of twelve) is directed toward the insurance of the mother’s eventual liberation, and higher ordination (at the age of 21) does this for the father (Crosby 2000: 147).

<sup>55</sup> Crosby 2008: 44

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*: 45

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*: 35; As one would expect, in contemporary practice, fissures in the male dominant narrative erode further. For example, when I was a *mae chi* in Thailand, my teacher was adamant that women could escape the rounds of samsara and achieve enlightenment in this lifetime though a serious commitment to Vipassana meditation. She was far from alone in this belief. For an in-depth look at historical, contemporary, and literary roles and portrayals of ordained women (*mae chi*) in Thailand see Seeger (2018). See also Collins and McDaniel (2010) on contemporary *mae chi*, their advanced study of Pali and the Abhidhamma, and the belief of many that escaping the rounds of rebirth is a realistic goal for *mae chi*.

<sup>58</sup> See: Wilson (1996)

Importantly, Hemachala is not limited to or defined by her role as wife, mother, or nun;<sup>59</sup> she is a single, unwed princess. Her role as daughter is important only in the sense that it is her father who asks his children to take the relic. This stands in contrast to the Lankan *Dāṭhāvamsa*, in which the relic bearers are married. We can thus take this as a reflection of a choice by the authors of the Nakhon chronicles to remove her from the role of wife and the hierarchical implications that entails. In a sense, she is freed from obligations to her husband and can instead focus solely on the relic. And while she is inextricably associated with her brother, she is the true custodian of the relic and the one entrusted with its material safekeeping. It is worth remembering that the Buddha's tooth was kept in Hemachala's long, tied up hair. This is in striking contrast to the shaved head of the male monk, which for all the wholesomeness and commitment to the Middle Way it marks, would have been unable to conceal the tooth and shepherd it to safe keeping. Moreover, in painted scenes found inside a small, domed, replica Indian-style *stūpa* in a sculpture park near Nakhon's City Museum, Thonthakuman is also shown with hair of his time; it is long, flowing, and partially pulled into a topknot. Long hair, like that the Buddha sported before dispensing of it with his sword upon leaving the palace, was common for upper caste Indians. It is noteworthy here since Thonthakuman also could have safely secured the relic in his tresses. Instead, his sister, Hemachala was chosen to do so.<sup>60</sup>

In much scholarship on women and contemporary Buddhist practice in Thailand, the focus has been on the role and status of *mae chi* within Thai society, and attempts at the

---

<sup>59</sup> It is worth remembering that in the *Lokapaññatti*, an eleventh to twelfth century Pali cosmological text popular in Southeast Asia, it is a 120-year-old female *bhikkunī* who locates the spot of the buried relics used to fill Aśoka of India's 84,000 *stūpa*.

<sup>60</sup> In one scene painting, it is Hemachala offering the relic to the Lankan king as her brother sits behind her. Again, she is the prominent figure rather than her male counterpart.

reestablishment of the Theravāda *sāmanerī* or *bhikkhunī* lineage.<sup>61</sup> In terms of female statuary at Buddhist monasteries in mainland Southeast Asia, scholars have looked to Phra Mae Kuan Im or Kwam Im, held in Mahayana traditions to be an incarnation of Avalokiteshvara in female form. The Chinese/Thai Kwam Yin's popularity rose during the late-nineteenth century, and Stratton has noted that her "acceptance by the Thais might illustrate the need for a soft, approachable, feminine deity among the powerful, predominately male, pantheon."<sup>62</sup> At Wat Phra That, there is no Kwam Im image. However, there is one at a monastery directly across the street. Images of Mae Thorani are ubiquitous throughout Thailand, and there are several images of her throughout the Wat Phra That, including the aforementioned one at the entrance to the building housing the King Asoke/Buddha image (*wihan sam jon*). Mae Thorani is a popular mythical figure who is known for assisting Siddhartha as he was in the process of attaining enlightenment. As the tale goes, during his many previous lives, every time the future Buddha performed a meritorious act, a drop of water was poured onto the earth. When the time came, the Earth Goddess, having collected each of these many deposits, wrung out her water-filled tresses, created a flood, and drowned Mara's army of demons.<sup>63</sup> Similar to Hemachala, it is Mae Thorani's long hair that allows her to protect the meditating so-to-be Buddha.

With this in mind, the Hemachala/Buddha statue at Wat Phra That becomes even more striking as it connects a pious laywoman to eventual Buddhahood. We do not need to look for feminine tropes or references, to a goddess, or to a female Bodhisattva. Instead, we have an

---

<sup>61</sup> For an in-depth look at historical, contemporary, and literary roles and portrayals of ordained women (*mae chi*) in Thailand see Seeger (2018). See also Collins and McDaniel (2010) on contemporary *mae chi*, their advanced study of Pali and the Abhidhamma, and the belief of many that escaping the rounds of rebirth is a realistic goal for *mae chi*. See also, for example, Falk (2008), Somswadi & Nicholas (2003), Muecke (2004), essays in both Findly, ed. (2000) and in Tsomo, ed. (2000), Titsa (1983), and Van esterik (1982). Regarding the full ordination of women in Thailand and Ven. Dhammananda's group at Wat Songdhammakalyani's efforts see: See Bhikkhum Dhammananda (2004) and Kabilsingh (1991), published under Ven. Dhammananda's former lay name.

<sup>62</sup> Stratton 2004: 337

<sup>63</sup> For the most comprehensive analysis on *mae thorani* in Southeast Asia see Guthrie's 2004 PhD Dissertation.

image of a Buddha/heroine standing tall, guarding the entrance to the Buddha gallery. This material imagery of a Buddha inextricably connected to a legendary women, stands in stark contrast to Buddhist texts that depict the Buddha as “the paragon of masculinity, the ‘ultimate man’ (*puruṣottama*)” with unmatched handsomeness, “superhuman virility and physical strength,” “skill in martial arts,” and one with an unmatched effect on the women who see him.”<sup>64</sup> Writing on the hagiographies of early Buddhism during the first millennium of the Common Era, Wilson argues the Buddhist women of South Asia were “subordinated to men not so much by rules that enshrine male privilege and circumscribe women’s rights but by representational practices that would have made it difficult for a woman to imagine herself following in the footsteps of highly revered Buddhist saints.”<sup>65</sup> The image of Hemachala/Buddha provides precisely this type of representational ideal that was by and large lacking in the early texts — a female figure as an example of what’s truly possible for women along the Middle Way. When we take seriously the implications of this image, we are left not only with a feminine Buddha (i.e., a Buddha taken to have feminine features), but a female Buddha — the Wandering Ascetic is Hemachala and Hemachala is he.

Importantly, the dynamics between these images and devotees is complicated by the different relationships and understandings locals have compared to the many out of town visitors to the monastery. Many local women, who readily identify the image as Hemachala, prefer this image for their veneration requests (her room also tends to be less trafficked and quieter than others, a feature residents looking to avoid the hubbub of tourist activity welcome). That is, those who regularly frequent the monastery and those who have some familiarity with the local chronicles and its heroes are likely to include “Hemachala” and “Thonthakuman” among their

---

<sup>64</sup> Powers 2009: 1

<sup>65</sup> Wilson 1996: 4

identifications of the images. As one man explained to me, the image of Thonthakuman is both “Thonthakuman,” “Buddha,” and an image of the “Buddha when he was a prince.” Visitors with little or no knowledge of how the relic is thought to have come to the monastery may not recognize the duality of the Buddha/hero(ine) images being discussed here, and thus may be more likely to see and interact with a “Buddha.” To complicate the matter, two brochures are available at the monastery: one in Thai and the other in English. In the English description of the Wihan Dhamma Sala (i.e., the Chanting Hall) the brochure says, “This is where the statues of Prince Thontha Khuman and Princes [*sic*] Hema Chala situated [*sic*].” Contrary to what one may be inclined to suspect, it does not mention anything about them being Buddha images.<sup>66</sup> In the Thai, however, it says that in front of the building is a standing image in royal dress of “*phra phuttha rup phra thonthakuman*” (Buddha image of/called Thonthakuman) and at the back of the building is “*phra phuttha rup phra nang hemachala*” (Buddha image of/called Hemachala). Thus, even in the monastery’s self-produced literature we are presented with duality in the identity of the images.

This acceptance of ambiguity simultaneously permits the recognition of duality and seeming contradiction. It also allows for a personalized interaction and relationship development; for some, the image of Hemachala/Buddha will be viewed as the local heroine and for others it may be yet another Buddha image. And for yet others it can be both, embodying the immeasurable powers of a potent Buddha image while also being particularly invested in the well-being of Nakhon as a local heroine and protector. In discussing Japanese monastic portraiture, Levine writes, “The intentional reidentification of a portrait from one individual to another would seem to require special scrutiny because of our deeply rooted expectations that

---

<sup>66</sup> I mention the English translation for two reasons. The first is simply that as a global tourist site, some visitors will only read this English version. Second, the differing labels highlight the ambiguity of the identity of the images.

portrait identity is so tied to physiognomic verism that to revise identity without a corresponding alteration of facial form would be contradictory to the (conventional sense of) portraiture itself [. . .] portrait resemblance [. . . has been] rhetorically modulated or devised to provoke tension.”

With these images we see something similar, although here we do not have the reidentification of an image, but a dual identification or a “conflation” that “deflates simple mimetic resemblance.”<sup>67</sup> And so, these images, and the relic story itself, bring to light the importance of flexibility, ambiguity, and duality. Through them we can see how seeming contradictions embody dynamic meanings, which allow for personal interpretation and utilization. As scholars of Theravāda Buddhism, we must continue to look — literarily beyond the Pali canon, and contemporarily beyond arguments surrounding the ecclesiastical hierarchy — for how women have been portrayed as heroes, accomplished Buddhists, and even Buddhas. Perhaps in doing so we will discover more ways women have been elevated through the use of Buddhist materials, and further, how these materials are embedded in everyday practice. Peter Skilling, writing about crowned Buddha images and those dressed in more elaborate royal regalia, writes:

These images have different meanings at different periods and in different contexts, or have layers of meaning at the same time. They may represent Gautama as Dharmaraja, the king of the dharma, the god higher than the gods. In the Khmer and Lopburi period, they may represent Mahayana ideas of the multiple forms in which Buddhas may appear. In the Thai period, they may represent Gautama Buddha vanquishing a proud king named Jambupati, by conjuring up a magical city in which he himself sat as king [. . .] The significations of images are not static; they are part of dynamic interactions between narratives, donors’ intentions, changing ideals, and imaginations.”<sup>68</sup>

With these images at Wat Phra That, we acutely see this layering of meaning: the Buddha is a hero(ine) and the hero(ine) a Buddha, both a man and woman, an ascetic and a prince(ss), an

---

<sup>67</sup> Levine 2005: 65

<sup>68</sup> Skilling 2012: 24

Ayutthaya-style art object and a responsive agent interceding in the world on behalf of loyal practitioners.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter began with an epigraph reminding us that Buddha images do many things. What we have seen in this chapter is that Buddha images can also be many things, and indeed, multiple people. A king is imagined as embodying the role of a righteous moral leader, but this time not as a ruling *cakkavatti*, but as one who turns the wheel of *dhamma*. A female Buddha is materially manifest and can act as a beacon of hope for Theravāda women on their journey along the Buddhist path. And, a seemingly ordinary hero, a background character who helped his sister complete an important task that helped preserve the *sāsana*, can too achieve the highest status possible before leaving the rounds of rebirth. Each of the figures examined in this chapter plays a critical role in the imagined history and so the shaping of the Buddhist identity of the Nakhon; without them there could be no Wat Phra That, and the city without its treasured monastery cannot be imagined.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### LOCAL PERSPECTIVES DURING THE EARLY STAGES OF A WORLD HERITAGE SITE NOMINATION

~“ *Respect and reciprocity cannot be decided by law or imposed by institutions,  
although disrespect and hierarchy can be and often are.*  
~ Lourdes Arizpe<sup>1</sup>

There is no denying the cultural import and overall impressiveness of Wat Phra That. The accompanying buildings are of architectural interest, diverse images from various historical periods and provinces are housed there, the grounds are host to Buddhist rituals and regional celebrations, and the town’s historiographical chronicles incorporate curious narratives alongside historical data. All of this combines to create a strikingly beautiful site with both a rich history and modern day significance. Pursuing international recognition, in 2012 Thailand’s Ministry of Natural Resources and Development had the monastery included on the country’s Tentative List, the first necessary step in having it designated as a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site (*morodoklok*).<sup>2</sup> However, as is well known in Thailand, World Heritage recognition can be fraught. On July 7, 2008, the Preah Vihear Temple (actually three temples in a complex), sitting atop a cliff in the Dângrêk mountain range along the Khmer-Thai border, was designated as a Cambodian UNESCO World Heritage

---

<sup>1</sup> Arizpe 2015: 160

<sup>2</sup> *Morodoklok* specifically refers to UNESCO World Heritage Sites, rather than a more general concept of “world heritage.” There are currently six sites (both natural and cultural) on Thailand’s Tentative List. The oldest has been on the list since 2004 and the newest was added in February of 2017. Already included on the World Heritage List are two natural World Heritage Sites (Dong Phrayayen-Khao Forest Complex and Thungyai-Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuaries) and three cultural World Heritage Sites (Ban Chiang Archeological Site, Historic City of Ayutthaya, and Historic Town of Sukhothai and Associated Historic Towns). All but the Forest Complex, which was included in 2005, were added between 1991 and 1992. Thus, there has not been a new cultural World Heritage Site added in Thailand in twenty-six years.

Site.<sup>3</sup> The temple complex, originally dedicated to Shiva but later utilized by Buddhists, with its 10<sup>th</sup> -11<sup>th</sup> century surviving architecture has been a point of contestation for over a century. In 1904, a joint commission of Siamese and French administrators mapped the region and, in their proposed treaty that followed the watershed of the Dânggrêk mountains, placed Preah Vihear almost entirely within Siam.<sup>4</sup> Three years later, French cartographers redrew the map and moved the border, thus repositioning the temple within the French protectorate of Cambodia (French: Cambodge). During WWII, Thailand sought to regain control of the ceded territory, but in 1962, the International Court of Justice in The Hague sustained the 1907 line leaving the temple in Cambodia.<sup>5</sup> That being said, it was not until January 15, 2003, nearly a hundred years later, that tourist access to the site was opened from the Cambodian side; in the years leading up to that point, Thailand maintained almost exclusive access to the Khmer temple.<sup>6</sup>

In Thailand, the 2008 UNESCO decision resulted in protests, which were enflamed by nationalist fervor and targeted a beleaguered government. That July, hundreds of troops moved to each side of the border, as both nations tried to stake their claim over the contested area. This began a multi-year conflict, which would result in various shootouts, thousands of villagers on each side being evacuated, the destruction of civilian structures, injury, and death. Although exact numbers are unknown, between October of 2008 and July 2011, at least 35 people were

---

<sup>3</sup> The other two cultural World Heritage Sites in Cambodia are Angkor (added in 1992) and the Temple Zone of Sambor Prei Kuk, Archaeological Site of Ancient Ishanapura (added in 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Thonchai Winichakul (1997) has famously shown how the idea that a nation-state is geographically bound and mapped was an idea imported from Europe to Southeast Asia.

<sup>5</sup> French involvement with the site did not end after decolonization as they were involved in the World Heritage Site nomination process. In 2004, the Association of Friends of Angkor (Association des Amis d'Angkor (AAA)) helped finalized the application. After a review of this initial application, the World Heritage Committee requested a more thorough conservation and management plan. And so, in September of 2007, under the France-UNESCO Cooperation Agreement, the French Ministry for foreign affairs sent an expert mission to Cambodia, which subsequently prepared a 400-page report to supplement the UNESCO nomination (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/activities/756/>).

<sup>6</sup> Thompson 2008: 205

killed and many more were injured.<sup>7</sup> A UNESCO designation meant to recognize and preserve historical sites not only fueled political turmoil, but cost lives as each side fought for the cultural symbolism and economic advantage they perceived was inherent in World Heritage status.<sup>8</sup> The temple, a World Heritage Site it must be remembered, was used as a military base,<sup>9</sup> and ironically, sustained a bit of damage during the crossfire.<sup>10</sup> As is clear, much is at stake — locally, politically, religiously, internationally, economically and emotionally — in the globalized process of creating heritage.

When I first visited Wat Phra That in August of 2013, there was hardly any mention of World Heritage Sites. However, by the time of my return in the spring of 2016, this had changed dramatically, and the possibility of the monastery being acknowledged by UNESCO was being widely discussed. In fact, the very first conversation I had upon my return to the monastery was with a woman excitedly inquiring if I had heard that Wat Phra That had become a World Heritage Site. She believed the designation had been granted and was excited to share the news. Many others I met around the monastery were eager to talk, brag, whisper, gossip, or vent about the UNESCO proposal. The topic aroused a whole spectrum of emotions — from pride to anger, excitement to anxiety, and joy to fear (not to mention apathy or boredom with the ongoing debates). While some are enthused about the possibility of global recognition, the chance to spread the teachings of the Buddha, share Nakhon’s history, and bring positive attention to Southern Thailand,<sup>11</sup> the proposed designation has also created anxiety, conflict, confusion, and a

---

<sup>7</sup> I compiled this number from various news articles. The exact numbers are disputed on each side.

<sup>8</sup> Both governments are well aware of the growing Asian middle class that is “increasingly cosmopolitan” and desirous of travel (Winter 2010: 127).

<sup>9</sup> The complex was also one of the last strongholds of the Khmer Rouge.

<sup>10</sup> See Kasetsiri (2013) for an in-depth analysis of the Preah Vihear conflict.

<sup>11</sup> Much attention paid to the South of Thailand (including most scholarly work in English) has focused on the conflict in the four southernmost provinces, rather than the cultural and historical richness of the region; Thai scholars continue to actively research the history of the region, particularly its archeological sites. Nakhon

sense of vulnerability within the community, particularly among those who feel they were marginalized by the local government that decided, without listening to their input, to proceed with the proposal.

A formal nomination packet has yet to be submitted to UNESCO. However, in 2014 the provincial government of Nakhon created an advisory World Heritage Committee to oversee the nomination process. Additionally, the Center for Arts and Culture at Rajabhat University of Nakhon Si Thammarat has produced a booklet to help guide the Nomination File;<sup>12</sup> the Center also created a website devoted to the nomination. Improvements to the grounds and surrounding areas continue, and archeological work is being conducted. Finally, extensive renovations to the principal *chedi* (*phra borommatham chedi*) are ongoing,<sup>13</sup> and we expected to be complete by September of 2018, although that deadline passed with renovations still underway. When this project is complete, the “Nomination File,” merely the second step in an already long process, can be finalized and submitted.<sup>14</sup> After submission, the file will be evaluated by an independent advisory body, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), as well as by the International Centre for the Study and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), an

---

specifically has acquired a reputation for being a relatively rough place, as it is home to the Thai mafia and has been plagued by violent crime. During the period of my ethnography in 2016, there was a string of knife holdups in an exercise park, for example, and in June of 2017, the body of a 17 year old novice, murdered by a monk and an accomplice, was found buried in the courtyard of a monastery down the road from Wat Phra That. Nonetheless, violent crime has been decreasing in the city.

<sup>12</sup> The World Heritage designation when applied to an historical site necessarily includes a limited, sterilized interpretation and presentation of its past, significance, present day activities, as well as ideas of how it should be represented and to whom in the future. For example, the booklet written as a guide for the Nomination File listed five categories, and each of the last four included five subcategories. Each topic is then summarized in a short paragraph or two. These categories are: Wat Phra That, the Southern Region’s Past, the Relic *Chedi* as the Flagship of *dhamma* in the South (with subsections on the principal *chedi*, architecture, the golden spire, (Lankan) bodhi tree, and important images (of which 5 are listed)); Valuables of Note (including: the bell-style *chedi*, the *chedi*’s symbolism, donative gifts, the cloth-wrapping ceremony, and Chatukham and Ramathep), and fifth, Dhamma Heritage World heritage (*morodoktham morodokklok*) (Sukragan 2015). In a brief presentation of a complex place there are exclusions.

<sup>13</sup> Sukragan 2013: iii

<sup>14</sup> [nakhonnews.com/2018/03/30](http://nakhonnews.com/2018/03/30)

intergovernmental advisory body. Then, during an annual meeting, the World Heritage Committee will decide whether or not to inscribe the site by determining if it meets the criteria of “outstanding universal value.” They may also request more information from the State Party of Thailand before making a final determination. Nonetheless, for many I spoke with, there was a perceived inevitability of the monastery becoming a UNESCO site; indeed, several thought the designation had already been granted and so were simply waiting to see what changes were sure to come.<sup>15</sup>

We can see the desired UNESCO designation as an attempt to preserve Wat Phra That’s past (e.g., its architecture, history/historiography, on-site customs, images, etc.) as it continues to be in contact with the present, and aims to exist in an imagined, ideal state well into the future. Since the making of heritage is a process, decisions must be made as to what is culturally, historically, pedagogically, aesthetically, and religiously important, and therefore worthy of preserving. This decision making process is inherently bound to power dynamics, as certain actors (e.g., government officials, university experts, UNESCO advisors) are consulted while others are excluded. As Michel Foucault showed in *The Order of Things* and *The Archeology of Knowledge*, throughout different periods in history people have thought about and classified objects in various ways, revealing deeper epistemological preferences and the dynamics of power. On a global scale, what we see with UNESCO World Heritage designations is an explicit classifying and ordering of sites throughout the world. This is inherently bound to the

---

<sup>15</sup> The application process begins with a member country preparing a “Tentative List” of natural and cultural heritage sites. This list may be updated at any time, but the inclusion of a site indicates that the country will submit a “Nomination File” (the second step in the nomination process), within approximately five to ten years. Inclusion on the State Party’s Tentative List is a requirement before UNESCO will consider a Nomination File. In the preparation of the Nomination File, the World Heritage Centre of UNESCO may offer assistance. I found one archived, 2013 news article stating that members of a UNESCO board would be visiting the site in late 2015. I never heard about the visit and was unable to find any record of it happening, although it certainly may have (thairath.co.th/content/537976; November 8, 2558 (2013)).

multilayered power structures of those involved in all stages of the application process, as well as to international standards set by UNESCO, which retains the ultimate decision making power (i.e., the determination of what constitutes “outstanding universal value”).

On the local level, at Wat Phra That, residents, market vendors, and others feel they have had little or no voice in such monumental decisions, which have already been impacting the use of their monastery. For example, for years during the town’s most cherished ritual, the cloth-wrapping ceremony (*hae pha khuen that*<sup>16</sup> or “carrying a painted cloth in a procession [to wrap around] a reliquary”), devotees have not been able to ascend the *chedi* and wrap the cloth because extensive scaffolding covers the structure. Beloved statues of local import have also been relocated to an obscure location near the back of the monastery in a debatable attempt at “beautifying” the grounds. Beyond that, the expensive and as of yet unsuccessful process of attempting to repair the monastery’s drainage system is considered frivolous and wasteful.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, the prospect of turning the monastery into a World Heritage Site, and in doing so creating the potential for mass tourism, has created tensions between local and global interests.<sup>18</sup> For some the UNESCO designation would be a legitimate way to attract tourists, while promoting Buddhism, Nakhon, the region, and Thailand. At the same time, they argue, the

---

<sup>16</sup> Previously this was called *hae phra bot khuen that* (“carrying a *pata* in a procession [to wrap around] the reliquary”) (Skilling 2006: 245).

<sup>17</sup> In preparing the site for the UNESCO application, various facilities in and around the monastery required upgrading, including moving the aboveground electric lines surround the monastery below ground to enhance the aesthetics, and improving the main road to the monastery ([thairath.co.th/content/537976](http://thairath.co.th/content/537976); November 8, 2558 (2013)). I have been told restrooms are also going to be upgraded. Additionally, the grounds of Wat Na Phra Lan, outside the southern wall of Wat Phra That, were to be improved and an “imaginary old town” would be built there (<http://phramahathat-heritage.com>; see section “ganprapprung phuen thi watnaphralan”).

<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that “pilgrimage and the circulation of religious ideas, texts, and images” have been a key part of Buddhist practice since the Emperor Ashoka’s (ca. 268-232 BCE) patronization of Buddhism during the Mauryan Empire. As Buddhism spread outwards from India, ideas were also sent back to the subcontinent, particularly through trade networks “that set in motion a vibrant exchange of commercial and religious interactions that filtered back to the paces of origin.” Through this dynamic process of intellectual exchange and interaction with diverse communities unique Buddhisms were formed (Geary 2017: 4-5). The extent and character of modern day interactions between various people and parts of the world is what is new and continually evolving.

economic benefits would be far-reaching. Others feel they are losing control of their most cherished religious site and fear they may never regain it, thereby losing the very place the designation was intended to protect. They also challenge the notion that economic gains (if they in fact come to fruition) would be beneficial to all, and may instead result in detriment to the most vulnerable community members.<sup>19</sup>



**Image 5.1:** Monks and novices lead lay devotees during cloth-wrapping ceremony (photo by author)

---

<sup>19</sup> These fears have come to fruition elsewhere in the Buddhist world. Vibha Bhattarai-Upadhyay shows that while conservation activities in the Kathmandu Valley have been widespread, spurred by the designation of seven UNESCO monument zones in 1979, the preservation of cultural heritage has been less successful. She argues this is a result of the state of Nepal being accountable to international agencies and policies, rather than to local communities and their customs and priorities. The result has been “locals’ resentment against measures to safeguard the World Heritage sites” (Bhattarai-Upadhyay: 161). Other cities receiving the designation have found it hard to strike a balance between maintaining the sites and culture that allowed a place to obtain World Heritage status in the first place and increased tourism. In the Casco Viejo neighborhood in Panama City, for example, the poorest local residents were pushed to the outskirts of town as tourists poured into the downtown district. On the other hand, in Luang Prabang, Laos, a town of 50,000 people expects more than 700,000 annual visitors by 2018, reflecting a sixteen percent annual increase in tourists to the once small town. According to officials, the UNESCO designation has stimulated economic growth in the town, through increases in the hospitality and restaurant industries, including large sums from foreign investors, as well as increasing jobs for those who produce local foods, produce, and handicrafts. The local infrastructure has also improved (*The Laotian Times*). Some scholars add that many locals welcome the changes, asserting they are benefiting from the advantages of modernity, and believe there are enough controls in place to maintain the town and their culture. Here too, however, some question the long-term environmental and cultural sustainability of such growth (Caust and Vecco 2017: 7-8).

With all this in mind, this chapter examines the contested moments surrounding the tedious and extensive measures that take place while an application for a UNESCO World Heritage Site is prepared.<sup>20</sup> It explores how individuals see themselves as benefiting from or becoming vulnerable to outside forces that wish to impose their priorities on them and a town's most treasured site. By exploring shifts in materials and practice, we see concrete examples of how change is manifest as heritage comes to be created and is challenged. Parties on both sides of the debate argue they are preserving local culture — by either embracing the perceived benefits of renovation, preservation, and globalization via UNESCO, or conversely, by challenging the notion that an international body, mass tourism, and shifting material culture is the correct way to utilize and conserve the site.

### **Creating Local and World Heritages**

For our purposes, I understand heritage to involve relations of power and determinations of meaning in the past, in contemporary social and political contexts, and importantly, in particular spaces where meaning continues to be crafted in the present through a variety of relationships, conversations, and engagements.<sup>21</sup> Broadly speaking it is a:

broadly used umbrella term for a variety of natural and human-made material objects as well as non-material aspects of culture<sup>22</sup> [ . . . ] In its etymological sense, heritage is something that we ascribe to ourselves, and something that we build upon. Hence, it is associated with our past, traditions, beliefs, rituals, memoirs, knowledge and skills, identity, pride, pain, shame, and many other aspects of everyday life as well. It is also

---

<sup>20</sup> This is in contrast to the numerous studies on the various after effects of the World Heritage designation. See Caust and Vecco (2017) for an analysis on the impact of tourism at three sites in Southeast Asia. For an in-depth, ethnographic study on the impacts of a World Heritage designation on a Buddhist Site, Bodh Gaya, see Geary (2017).

<sup>21</sup> Here I am following Laurajane Smith's idea that heritage is not just about the past and/or material things, but is also a "process of engagement, an act of communication and an act of making meaning in and for the present" (Smith 2006: 1).

<sup>22</sup> This follows the UNESCO designations of natural heritage, and tangible and intangible cultural heritage, respectively.

perceived at different levels [. . .] individual, familial, communal, national and international levels.<sup>23</sup>

Heritage marks the achievements and features, both tangible and intangible, of groups at these various levels. Moreover, Heritage Studies itself is a multidisciplinary area of academic specialization, utilizing methods and theories from archeology, history, anthropology, material culture, history, law, religious studies, art history, and others. While David Lowenthal is often credited with the creation of the field in his 1985 book, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, thirty years later the area of study is still emerging.<sup>24</sup> In a 2009 volume, various contributors state that the field is a “relatively new discipline,”<sup>25</sup> a “burgeoning field,”<sup>26</sup> and that as of yet there exists “no discipline such as heritage.”<sup>27</sup> While the academic field may be yet emerging, the global interest in identifying, preserving, and consuming heritage is not. The most famous of these projects, founded in 1972, is that of UNESCO World Heritage.<sup>28</sup> Via three conventions, UNESCO has divided man-made heritage into Tangible Heritage (sites, buildings, monuments, etc.) and Intangible Heritage (rituals, stories, performances, etc.).<sup>29</sup> They also recognize World Natural Heritage sites alongside tangible heritage in the first convention.<sup>30</sup> If earned, World

---

<sup>23</sup> Chapagain 2013: 6

<sup>24</sup> See also: Hewison (1987) and Lumley (1988) for early sources on heritage.

<sup>25</sup> Sørensen and Carman: 17

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*: 140

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*: 326

<sup>28</sup> The World Heritage List was introduced with the “Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage.” It has been a wildly successful public relations move by UNESCO, as it is what the organization is most well-known for in many parts of the world (Foster 2015: 5).

<sup>29</sup> The three conventions are, respectively, the *Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* (1972), *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003), and *Convention for the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression* (2005).

<sup>30</sup> While well beyond the scope of this paper, natural World Heritage Sites are also points of contestation, conservation, management, and international cooperation. Poachers flood nearly half the 200 natural World Heritage sites to procure illegal wildlife goods, often obtained from critically endangered species (e.g., from Javan rhinos, wild tigers and African elephants) that fill the fourth largest black market in the world (after drugs, guns and humans). According to the same report commissioned by the World Wildlife Federation, “Wildlife trafficking has also often endangered people’s lives, and between 2009 and 2016 at least 595 rangers were killed in the line of duty, many of whom were protecting World Heritage sites” (Johnson 2017).

Heritage titles acknowledge existing “outstanding universal value” while insisting on their preservation. This process of legitimization is inherently bound to exclude certain places and customs, while also changing others through a process that forces them to be identifiable, material, distinct, and accessible. Furthermore, as we saw in the example of Preah Vihear, the method of obtaining the designation creates “new arenas for competing political and economic interests that seek to appropriate viable heritage resources.”<sup>31</sup> During these proceedings, not all will profit financially nor will all reap social or religious benefit.

In 2012, the Association of Critical Heritage Studies released its manifesto pushing back on previous scholarship and heritage practices, arguing that “Nationalism, imperialism, colonialism, cultural elitism, Western triumphalism, social exclusion based on class and ethnicity, and the fetishising of expert knowledge have all exerted strong influences on how heritage is used, defined and managed.” Therefore, they argue, a focus must be brought to the “marginalised and excluded,” shifting the emphasis away from the “Authorised Heritage Discourse” that “privileges old, grand, prestigious, expert approved sites, buildings and artefacts that sustain Western narratives of nation, class and science” based on the opinions of “experts in archaeology, history, architecture and art history.” As has been pointed out, the most prevailing view on heritage “draws heavily from the Western European architectural and archaeological conservation and preservation practices that define it as material, monumental, good, aesthetic, and of universal value.” As such, more recently, there has been a shift to include “intangible” cultural practices (e.g., stories, rituals, religious practice, performances, etc.) in an attempt to

---

<sup>31</sup> Kuutma 2013: 4

recognize these aspects of a culture that have previously been maligned as mere “popular culture” or “tradition.”<sup>32</sup>

As is the case with World Heritage, any formal label that aims to preserve and protect heritage necessarily also includes a sense of loss that is real, perceived, or feared.<sup>33</sup> That is, this conceptualization of heritage “depends on modernity’s sense that the present needs to re-forge links with a past that appears to be severed and lost in the changing world.” What is being preserved and exalted then is an ideal of “past elements of a reified culture intended to manifest ethnicity, locality and history.”<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, although unsurprisingly, on the ground at Wat Phra That, the same critiques being levied in heritage studies (i.e., Western dominated preferences, discourses, and sense of aesthetics) are quite similar to the charges brought by skeptics against the UNESCO application. Will the reification of a narrow version of history and the goal of preservation, accomplished by following externally imposed rules, forever cripple or sever the relationships devotees maintain with the site by altering their patterns of devotion? Or, on the other hand, does added care, investment, and global recognition genuinely protect not only the material bases of the monastery, but also the traditions and histories it has harbored for centuries?

---

<sup>32</sup> Renato Rosaldo rightly notes that “intangible heritage” exists as a normative concept and relationally in contrast to “tangible heritage.” He writes, “Intangible heritage is considered to be of less obvious value than the tangible. It is the immaterial or the ephemeral as opposed to the material or the enduring, even permanent. Tangible heritage, by contrast, is a monument, say, a cathedral or an aqueduct or a still-standing ancient city of exquisite beauty. In this relationship, the intangible appears less substantial, less enduring and hence of less obvious value [ . . . ] The claim to worth of intangible heritage is that of a vital, changing, yet long-lasting tradition of song or story, dance or cuisine, knowledge and skills involved in the production of material objects. With current technology for recording speech and body movement, much that is called intangible can be archived and studied and thus made part of the human record in ways that were not possible fifty years ago. The intangible can thus be an object of research” (Renato 2013: 37).

<sup>33</sup> Kuutma 2013: 1

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*: 11

Although the UNESCO designation creates heritage in a specific way, the concept of heritage itself is deeply embedded in Thai culture. Indeed, it is the meeting of these concepts (*morodok*<sup>35</sup> and *morodoklok*) at Wat Phra That, which has sparked so much controversy as the notion that they can exist simultaneously is either lauded or challenged. Justin McDaniel argues, “mainstream rituals, texts, images, and liturgies” are characterized by their emphasis on four repertoires: heritage, security, graciousness, and abundance (*morodok*, *khvam plotphai* or *kan pongkan*, *kwam sawatdiphap* or *kreng jai*, and *udom sombum*, respectively). He writes, “[...] the more an individual monk or monastery can show that they promote security, heritage, graciousness, and abundance (and others, of course) and use the images, objects, sounds, and movements in a widely recognized and shared repertoire, the better they will be able to compete for relevance in a highly competitive religious marketplace of ideas and objects [...]”<sup>36</sup> Rather than focusing on Buddhist ethical norms, like selflessness, nonattachment, or compassion, impermanence, equanimity, or enlightenment, McDaniel encourages the viewing of Thai Buddhism through these repertoires. He focuses specifically on *local* heritage (although the category is left unqualified as simply heritage/*morodok*), and thus towns’ connections to local monks, monasteries, rituals, amulets, stories, and royal family members throughout history, which are often promoted in “inscriptions, plaques, posters, and in sermons.”<sup>37</sup> To this we may now add websites.

Examples of local heritage are, as one would expect, widespread throughout Wat Phra That. Like chanting halls throughout Thai monasteries, the one at Wat Phra That displays

---

<sup>35</sup> The Thai *morodok* also carries the sense of an inheritance left to one’s heirs. This is in line with the idea that cultural heritage has two primary meanings: the first, a “succession to property and financial wealth, which occurs through the paternal line”; and second, “the reference to certain goods that are representative and of a symbolic nature that a community has processed selectively and with which it identifies itself” (Machuca 2013: 57).

<sup>36</sup> McDaniel 2011: 13-14

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*: 226

lifelike, wax images of former abbots and one of Southern Thailand's most famous monk, Luang Phu Thuat.<sup>38</sup> The grounds of Wat Phra That host not only Buddhist rituals, but also celebrations of regional customs, including Southern Thai dance performances and amulet making ceremonies. The guardians of the town, Chatukham and Ramathep, have various images throughout the grounds, including ones protecting the doorway leading up the principal *chedi*; they are therefore tasked with defending the Buddha's relic. In fact, the widespread popularity of Chatukham-Ramathep amulets from Wat Phra That created a multi-billion dollar industry between 2006 and 2007, as they are thought to bring power, wealth, health, and other success to their possessors. As we have seen, the town has deep historiographical ties to its local heroes, Hemachala and Thonthakuman, the sibling pair who brought the Buddha relic to Nakhon. The header on the homepage of phramahathat-heritage.com, run by Rajabhat University of Nakhon Si Thammarat to promote the World Heritage application, proudly displays photos of the royal family, namely Rama IX and Queen Sirikit, visiting the monastery, and one can link to more photos and descriptions of four of his five visits (indeed, heritage can reinforce support for certain political ideologies too). The adjacent market is replete with local jewelry, notably Nakhon silver, basket weaving, regional snacks, images of local monks and heroes, and other celebrations of the monastery, town, province, and region. These are just a few examples of the local heritage that is embedded throughout Wat Phra That at any one time.

This repertoire of heritage (*morodok*) changes when it comes in direct contact with World Heritage (*morodoklok*). We must ask whether or not (local) heritage and World Heritage are compatible? If they come to exist simultaneously what happens to each in the process? Nezar

---

<sup>38</sup> The late 16<sup>th</sup> - early 17<sup>th</sup> century monk is renown throughout the region (notably his association with Wat Chang Hai in Pattani province), country and beyond (especially Malaysia) for not only his prowess in Buddhist teachings, but also his ability to perform miracles. Amulets bearing his image remain among the most popular throughout the country and promise protection and invulnerability.

Al Sayyad argues that heritage is “knowledge of and/or rights over material and non-material things transmitted over time. It is, by definition, owned, and can, with permission from its owners, be consumed.”<sup>39</sup> One primary underlying concern at Wat Phra That revolves around who has the authority to offer Wat Phra That to UNESCO, and thus make decisions that will impact so many? To put it simply, who is the rightful owner of the heritage bound to Wat Phra That? Or, as one Facebook user asked, “#World heritage is whose heritage?”<sup>40</sup>

### **Proud to Promote: Advocates for World Heritage**

Unsurprisingly, some opinions on UNESCO fell between advocacy and opposition, as informants said it was “fine” (*chuey chuey, oke, gao dai*) if it did or did not become a World Heritage Site, and others expressed apathy or boredom with the seemingly never-ending debates (and likely the ethnographer inquiring about the topic). Yet, strong opinions on the matter abound, particularly since the process of creating heritage creates a fertile ground for both “celebration and contestation.”<sup>41</sup> Many are excited about the prospect of Nakhon being placed on the world stage, and the officials involved are trying to garner as much public support as possible. In 2013, Chatchai Supakarn the Chairman of the Cultural Council of Nakhon Si Thammarat Province (also Chairman of the Working Group on the Documentation for the World Heritage Listing) publically advocated for the World Heritage designation, outlining the following benefits at a town meeting. First, it would allow for the “protection of the cultural heritage” of Nakhon (*raksa morodok wattanatam*) for future generations. Second, it is a way to take care of (*raksa*) Thai Buddhism (*phra puttassana kong chao thai*) so that it may be passed

---

<sup>39</sup> Graburn 2001: 18-19

<sup>40</sup> #morodoklokkeupenmorodokkhongkrai?

<sup>41</sup> Kuutma 2013: 8

on (i.e., preservation of the *sāsana*). Third, it would protect the cultural heritage of the Thai people in a way that keeps with international principles of conservation.<sup>42</sup> The first and third reasons align directly with the objectives of UNESCO’s mission to protect heritage, and the second reiterates the concern of preserving Buddhism itself.

The only news article I could find documenting the meeting was brief and surely left out much that was discussed.<sup>43</sup> However, what is not mentioned here, in any other news articles I can find, in the report submitted for the Tentative List, or the booklet created by the Center for Arts and Culture at Rajabhat University, is an explanation as to *why* the World Heritage designation specifically is needed to accomplish the task of preserving Thai and Nakhon heritage and Buddhism itself — something that has been done up to this point without an international governing body and designation.<sup>44</sup>

Additionally, Supakarn argued it would give the people of Nakhon great pride, while benefiting the city economically with an influx of tourism. It is well known that the UNESCO brand is “an important marketing tool in world tourism and its presence ensures many more visitors” to the place that has earned the title, especially during a time when more people are travelling the globe than was ever possible before.<sup>45</sup> In one sense, obtaining the World Heritage

---

<sup>42</sup> [thairath.co.th/content/537976](http://thairath.co.th/content/537976) (November 8, 2558 (2013))

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> The speculative answer, as it frequently does, may center on the chance of economic gain and the accompanying power and recognition that comes with it. However, one may also wonder about the government’s interest in establishing a Buddhist monastery as a World Heritage site on Thailand’s southern peninsula. The move could, perhaps, be read as a political strategy, whereby a well-known international body grants a declaration to the Thai State formally marking the southern peninsula as Buddhist (read: as opposed to Muslim). The prudence of this seeing as how Nakhon Si Thammarat province is outside the conflict zone would certainly be debatable, and yet this proposition may be worth considering as the process unfolds.

<sup>45</sup> Caust and Vecco 2017: 1

brand could effectively and efficiently “commodify their local distinctiveness” as Nakhon competes with other locations throughout Thailand and beyond.<sup>46</sup>

At the same meeting, the Deputy Governor of the province also stated that residents are proud of the possible designation. In other words, according to these officials, the World Heritage designation is necessary (or at least considerably helpful) to preserve Thai and Nakhon heritage, as well as Thai Buddhism, with the repercussions being pride and economic prosperity. Likewise, during my fieldwork, I spoke with many women and men in their early twenties to those in their sixties who were “proud” (*phum chai*) or “very proud” (the most common adjective used) of Nakhon, Wat Phra That, and in fact, all of Southern Thailand because of the possible UNESCO designation, which they saw as elevating them to a national and global position that is well-deserved and long overdue. This emphasis on tourism as a mechanism to help others learn about the town, province, and most importantly Buddhism and Wat Phra That was the most common theme I heard from those with a positive view of the UNESCO designation. One local man was excited that people “speaking many different languages” could learn about Buddhist history and maybe even learn ways to practice the *dhamma*. Perhaps, he thought, a visit to Wat Phra That could help teach people how “to think for themselves,” a benefit to society that surely outweighed any possible risk. One 60-year old lay devotee, who keeps the eight precepts and her head shaved, said that receiving the designation means others are interested in Buddhism, and more specifically, Buddhism in Thailand. This can only be a good thing.

Others, primarily merchants, thought the designation would be good for business. For example, one Muslim woman in her early twenties working at a stand selling toys, jewelry, and other trinkets, thought she would possibly earn additional income if more tourists visit and pass

---

<sup>46</sup> Labadi and Long 2010: 8

by her stand. A middle-aged, 12<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher from Nakhon speculated that the possible increase in capital for ordinary workers must be the driving force behind the great interest in UNESCO; she could not figure another reason. In sum, those with optimistic views on the World Heritage designation correlated it positively with their views on tourism; it is an opportunity for people from elsewhere, both Asians and Westerners, to learn about Nakhon, southern culture, and Wat Phra That, while at the same time contributing to the local and Buddhist economies (e.g., spending at markets and restaurants, and donating to Wat Phra Thāt and other monasteries they may visit). At the same time, they would be providing an opportunity for others to learn some *dhamma*, make merit, and perhaps even become better global citizens in the process.

### **Regulations, Rituals, and Materiality: Anxieties about a World Heritage Site**

During my research, the monastery's adjacent market was the most fertile ground for those who contested the designation and felt disenfranchised by the process, although I spoke to others on the grounds and throughout the town who shared similar concerns. According to several merchants, while administrators were peddling rumors of surging economic prosperity, they feared they could be forced out of their stalls, have to alter what they sold and/or how they sold it, or have to pay a share of their earnings to an external body. However, as community members who have and continue to spend a great majority of their time at the monastery, their gravest concerns extend beyond financial implications. There were questions about why all the expenditure (mental, physical, and monetary) is necessary, and who is actually benefitting from it all. As one may expect, the concerns of locals are multifaceted, but many are rooted in the uncertainty of what stipulations and regulations would be externally imposed if the designation

were granted. Most troubling: would local traditions be regulated or even possibly eradicated in the name of outstanding universal value? I had a lengthy conversation with monk at Wat Phra That who carefully listed and explained the problems he believed were inherent in the designation. While small in stature, he carried himself in an impressive and imposing way; he spoke softly but passionately against the proposed UNESCO site. Others who expressed worry were not as comprehensive in the listing of their apprehensions and objections, but always shared at least one of his concerns.

This particular monk articulated the problems of UNESCO as fourfold: first, there was a lack of community involvement in the decision to turn Wat Phra That into a World Heritage Site. According to him, no one ever bothered to ask the people of Nakhon how they felt or what they wanted. Rather, the petition was basically just Yingluck Shinawatra (in office 8/5/2011-5/7/2014),<sup>47</sup> a handful of people in her government, and the local Nakhon government preparing the UNESCO petition without discussing it with Nakhon's residents.<sup>48</sup> This same issue was repeatedly expressed to me (although this monk was the only one to specifically mention of Yingluck) and also seems to be the root cause of why there is so much confusion surrounding the

---

<sup>47</sup> Yingluck is the sister of Thaksin Shinawatra, a prominent Thai businessman turned Prime Minister from 2001-2006, when he was ousted from power in a coup. Generally speaking, after being removed from power, Thaksin remained popular in the North and Northeast, particularly among rural, poor, and uneducated populations. His stronghold was never in the South, where he remains disliked by the majority. When his sister ascended to power, those who already detested Thaksin saw her as an extension of him and what they perceived as his crooked, illegal, and dangerous policies. See: Phongpaichit and Baker (2005) and McCargo and Pathmanand (2005) for more on Thaksin's rise to power and policies. See: Sopranzetti (2015) and Montesano, et al (2012) on the movement and subsequent protests revolving around the support Thaksin engendered.

<sup>48</sup> UNESCO encourages local participation (e.g., "property owners, site managers, local and regional governments, local communities, NGOs and other interested parties") writing, "The participation of local people in the nomination process is essential to enable them to have a shared responsibility with the State Party in caring for the property and to ensure proper use is made of local knowledge, and to ensure that the local situation regarding issues such as perception and resource use is understood [ . . . ] the reasons for this approach are many but include the need to develop a shared understanding of the nominated property and shared responsibility for its future. Successful integrated management is not likely if stakeholders are not involved and do not participate. Such participation should be a priority from the start of the process and all the way through the preparation of a nomination. This participation should also continue after the nomination as well, as part of the ongoing management of the property" (*Preparing World Heritage Nominations*, pp. 52-53). The issue, of course, is how exactly local participation is envisioned and then enacted, and how the power dynamics within the community and beyond actually play out.

potential UNESCO site. Locals feel excluded and acutely sense the power discrepancy at play at both the local and national levels. This is their monastery, culture, community, and livelihoods, and yet this enormous decision was made by a small handful of people. In fact, some merchants in the adjacent market told me they were afraid to vocalize their concerns with local government officials since they worried they might be removed from their stalls for doing so. Instead, they would often get together to lament the situation. UNESCO does call for the inclusion of local communities throughout the nomination process and in the management of the site afterwards. So, at one forum held on November 7, 2013 in an effort to gather public opinions and advocate for the World Heritage designation, representatives from nineteen Nakhon communities were reportedly in attendance, alongside city government officials, monks, and members of the general public. The article does not mention which communities these are and, more importantly, does not report on their opinions about the designation, instead focusing on why the Chairman of the Cultural Council of Nakhon Si Thammarat Province thought it a positive and important opportunity.<sup>49</sup> The lack of representation in local news media is not encouraging for those already feeling ostracized by the process. In any case, the application process itself is bound to exclude members of local communities. That is, in the “national validation process” only a “State Party” is formally addressed, and there is no mechanism in place to actually protect and advocate for the interests of the local communities, bound to be diverse and conflicting. Kristin Kuutma asks, “To what extent would protecting or safeguarding mechanisms go beyond securing the interest of state parties, in order to be capable of addressing localized needs and delivering culturally appropriate safeguarding mechanisms?” It is precisely this question that has not been satisfactorily answered in Nakhon.

---

<sup>49</sup> [thairath.co.th/content/537976](http://thairath.co.th/content/537976); November 8, 2558 (2013)

Second, are the worries about the effects of mass tourism. For example, how would aging merchants and shopkeepers respond to an influx of foreign tourists? The elderly, it was explained, do not want to deal with the hassle of non-Thai speaking customers. Beyond the social discomfort was the additional worry that UNESCO would forcibly drive out merchants who could not or did not want to interact with foreigners in favor of those who would be more accommodating — this would not only be financially and personally devastating for residents of Nakhon but it is simply unfair. Additionally, some are keenly aware of the impact that mass tourism has had on other popular tourist destinations. For example, I spoke with a jovial, middle-aged, Muslim man from a small town near Phuket, who was in Nakhon for his nephew's wedding. When I asked him for his feelings on UNESCO, a look of displeasure washed over his face as he shook his head negatively, before saying said he did not like the idea of World Heritage Sites. He went quiet for a few seconds before adding that he thought people were probably afraid that what happened in Phuket (not a World Heritage Site, but one of the most popular tourist destinations in Thailand) would come to plague Nakhon — the influx of tourists has not only polluted and wreaked havoc on the environment but also brought along seedy behavior. These issues of economic and environmental sustainability have not been addressed in Nakhon.<sup>50</sup>

Third, both opponents of the designation (and, indeed, some proponents) view the time and great expense that has been invested in attempts to have the monastery meet the standards of UNESCO as wasteful spending. Most notably is the 26 million Baht (~\$780,000)<sup>51</sup> grant that has

---

<sup>50</sup> Landorf, after reviewing six World Heritage sites and their management processes, concluded that they rarely factor in consultation or broader sustainability issues.” (Landorf 2009: 2). As of yet, I have not found evidence of these being addressed in Nakhon either. However, they could be included in the Nomination File, which has yet to be prepared.

<sup>51</sup> This amount is according to one informant, who said the grant came from the central Thai government.

been spent on rebuilding Wat Phra That's drainage system; after years of repairs, the site still floods regularly. This cost does not include the many man-hours put in by volunteers, who also, at the time of my fieldwork, spent a week digging in excruciating heat working to improve the drainage system. In April and May of 2016, Nakhon endured its longest, hottest heat wave in sixty years. This resulted in a severe drought, with farmlands withering, public water supplies exhausted, and individual households left without water for toilets and washing. At last, near the end of May, when a most welcome rain finally fell over Nakhon, the grounds of Wat Phra That immediately began to flood leaving an inch or two of water covering much of the courtyard as large puddles formed elsewhere. The monastery's manager, a proponent of the designation for the most part, expressed frustration (both in conversations with me and in public Facebook posts) with the ongoing expense on the drainage system. The monastery has always flooded, but it was never considered a serious problem, so this great expense seems both unnecessary and is a cause of frustration.



**Image 5.2:** Main courtyard floods in front of two replica *stūpa* and scaffolding encompasses the principal *chedi* (photo by author)

An additional 60 million Baht (~\$1.8 million) has reportedly been spent on renovations, including that to the principal *chedi*. Of that, about half came from government grants and half from a single large donation.<sup>52</sup> These two types of spending are viewed differently, however. Building and repairing monasteries is generally considered meritorious, and Buddhists have “historically sponsored the construction of *stupas*, monasteries, images and murals of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, along with other meritorious deeds.”<sup>53</sup> This remains true in Thailand today. Monks may even be permitted to be involved in repair work to monasteries. It is not uncommon, particularly at more rural monasteries, to see a monk or novice’s orange monastic robes tied to create makeshift pants so they may hammer, paint, or otherwise work around their abodes more comfortably. Indian inscriptions often note donations made for the upkeep of monasteries, and the *Visuddhimagga* states that monasteries in a state of disrepair are unsuitable for the contemplative life of monks and ought to be repaired.<sup>54</sup> Since the *chedi*, particularly one containing a Buddha relic, is thought to emanate Buddhist power and potency, a *stūpa* in decay is “perceived as spiritually less powerful, gradually losing its significance.”<sup>55</sup>

In the town and *chedi* chronicles of Nakhon, there are multiple references to the

---

<sup>52</sup> The most recent reports on spending I can find are in articles from 2013 and 2016. The former states that the Governor of the province was setting aside one million Baht for the World Heritage fund. This was to be used for archeological work at eight relevant sites in the province, including at Wat Phra That. Also, 525,000 Baht was being allocated for the repairs to the drainage system (August 17, 2556 (2013), [thairath.co.th/content/693306](http://thairath.co.th/content/693306)). The 2016 article states that three million Baht had accumulated in the World Heritage fund, although it is unclear how much had been spent from the same fund between 2013 and 2016. The Southern provinces also supported the *chedi* renovations with a pledge of 30 million Baht. Additionally, one wealthy donor, Jimmy Chawala, gave 28 million Baht to be used on renovations for the *chedi* (note: the 2013 article put the figure at 29 million Baht). The donation was first ceremoniously given to Rama IV, who then donated it to Wat Phra That. However, the monastery manager told me this total fund was being used for all the necessary repairs and improvement to the monastery, not just the *chedi* renovations. Moreover, 999 *chedi* replicas, each just over 14 inches tall, were being sold at 14,999 Baht a piece to raise additional funds. ([www.thairath.co.th/content/659004](http://www.thairath.co.th/content/659004) July 9, 2559 (2016)). Drainage problems persist, however, and I heard additional funds have been spent in attempts to fix this issue, although I cannot locate any print source indicating the amount.

<sup>53</sup> Chapagain 2013: 55

<sup>54</sup> Silk 2008: 77-78

<sup>55</sup> Chapagain 2013: 55

rebuilding of the great reliquary at the behest of various kings. The expansive renovations on the principal *chedi* today, then, are an extension of a historical tradition. A couple local merchants expressed that Wat Phra That has been fine for generations and a new UNESCO designation seems to be bringing only hassle, headache, and expense for very little return. Nonetheless, they were quick to point out the caveat that the maintenance and beautification of the central *chedi* is worthwhile. Indeed, Facebook posts about its renovations typically garner hundreds of “likes” and many positive comments (e.g., most commonly “sadhu,” which is used as a respectful way of saying “thank you” for Buddhist works and gifts). Generally speaking, *chedi* renovations are accepted as a worthwhile and righteous investment. That being said, there is a growing frustration with the years-long renovation process, which has revealed an inherent lack of trust between government officials and ordinary folk. For example, during the spring of 2018, archeological digs took place around the base of the *chedi*. Researchers from local universities, the World Heritage Council of Nakhon, and others say this is to find and date ancient artifacts. However, some people vocally posted their skepticism on Facebook, suggesting it to be the work of corrupt officials and modern day looters (which if true, would indeed be the continuation of another tradition).<sup>56</sup>

The fourth and final concern, in general, is a fear of outsiders and their ability (and seeming eagerness) to impose their will and standards on local people. The French, English, and Americans have a lengthy, negative history in Southeast Asia through colonialism, war, and exploitation. Although Thailand was never colonized, many still perceive Westerners as arrogant, uninformed, and looking to capitalize on the backs of Thais. If UNESCO enters the town without the local people being consulted and then has the authority to decide how the

---

<sup>56</sup> This post with pictures of the dig with the accompanying comments expressing skepticism was either removed or taken down after being briefly posted.

monastery is operated, this is, in a way, thought of as a new type of colonialism simply disguised as “development.” This is connected to a central concern I heard frequently — Wat Phra That is still a “living” and “community site,” unlike Ayutthaya, Sukhothai or Angkor, all well-known Southeast Asian World Heritage Sites, but ones that are “dead.”

In the face of an already changing space, the fear is that outsiders would have the authority to prohibit the performance of traditional rituals under regulations aimed at preserving the material integrity of the site. My favorite local masseuse, a true expert in the ancient Thai practice, thought Wat Phra That had recently been granted World Heritage status and was surprised when I told her that was not the case. A few years before I spoke with her, she had made a request at the Hemachala/Buddha image asking for help while deciding on a career change. She received her blessing, got trained as a masseuse, and now runs a successful shop out of the front of her home. She loves her new career. Since her business is small and dependent on local women, so she was not concerned one way or the other about how she would fair economically if the new brand was applied to the monastery. Moreover, her favorite *wat* is elsewhere in town, so her concerns about Wat Phra That are relatively less personal than those who prefer that monastery for daily veneration, or who spend much of their time there (e.g., merchants). Nevertheless, she feared the monastery would stop being a “community site” (*sathanthi chumchon*) when it changed into “World Heritage Site,” (*morodoklok*). She thought local people would likely lose control over the space and stop being able to use it as they had in the past. This was a widely shared concern.

And, while much ado has been made in recent scholarship about the “commodification” of contemporary Buddhism in Thailand, the potential monetary gains from increased global tourism do little to persuade these devotees, who remain primarily interested in retaining local

control of the monastery and the ability to utilize the site as they see fit for Buddhist and traditional practices. They question: even if an economic boom does come to pass, if it simultaneously disrupts and destroys all that made Wat Phra That and Nakhon unique and vitally important in the first place, what would be the point?

In *Architects of Buddhist Leisure*, McDaniel rightly notes, “Buddhist monasteries are as much tourist sites to Thai Buddhists as they are to foreign non-Buddhists [ . . .],” although Thais, while also taking the time to enjoy them leisurely, ritually engage with the sites differently. As such, the dichotomy between so-called secular and religious spaces breaks down in Buddhist spaces, including monasteries, which he aptly labels “semiprivate”; Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike can visit, but there are “standards of dress and decorum; a clearly defined ecclesia of nuns, novices, and monks; a designated ritual and educational space; and formal and semiformal ritual and liturgical activities.”<sup>57</sup> This is true. It is worth adding, however, that beyond ritual engagement and devotion, those who regularly frequent or work at a monastery often regard foreign (Asian and Western) tourists differently than Thai tourists. The former, while typically welcomed, may also produce anxiety. Beyond language barriers (notably more difficult for the elderly), Buddhists who cherish these sites worry about whether or not the appropriate amount of respect is paid to particular images and objects; or perhaps more pertinently, they want to ensure that disrespect is not directed toward them. Additionally, foreign tourists can be perceived as rude, aggressive, and unmanageable. Some foreign tourists have to be dealt with.

There is no doubt that the dichotomy of secular versus religious breaks down quite easily when we pay attention to the wide range of activities at monasteries. Nonetheless, what we see happening at Wat Phra That is a pushback by those who explicitly wish to reassert the

---

<sup>57</sup> McDaniel 2016: 9-12

specifically Buddhist/religious nature of the monastery in the face of what they perceive as a threat posed by a global, secular designation that promises to usher in foreign tourists and jeopardize their use of the monastery. Most pertinently, they do not want the particularly secular, Western notion of preservation lauded by organizations like UNESCO to override the importance of tactile engagement with objects throughout the monastery during quotidian propitiation and annual rituals. We can see a desire to safeguard the outwardly Buddhist and traditional to stave off this outside encroachment that is viewed as a threat to all of this. This introduces a necessary nuance to the understanding of “semiprivate” monasteries. When Buddhist public culture allows or encourages certain (secular) behaviors and decorum from those who regularly frequent the space, live in the town, or other Thais, that is one thing and monasteries do often become places of leisure, performance, gaming, etc. It is something else entirely, however, when an external group, without thorough consultation with the community, tries to impose their (secular) preferences and rules on the devotees and their use of the space. In other words, for critics, what is happening at Wat Phra That is the difference between Buddhist-led ecumenism<sup>58</sup> (i.e., spreading the ideas of Buddhism to new locals) and a perceived, forced inclusion (i.e., bringing more outsiders and foreign rules into an already Buddhist space).

---

<sup>58</sup> In *Architects*, McDaniel examines “Buddhist ecumenism,” or the global spread of Buddhism which has been undertaken without actively seeking “converts, allegiance, or centralized power,” eschatological promises, efforts to unite a Buddhist populous under one sect or homeland, or a focus on influencing international politics (McDaniel 2016: 5-6).



**Image 5.3:** Secondary *stūpa* wrapped in cloth (photo by author)

The cloth-wrapping ceremony is the practice most are concerned about being permanently disrupted. This event is seen as the paramount indigenous custom, while also being a way to make merit and engage in relational exchanges with the relic, primary and secondary *chedi*, and other objects throughout the monastery. A common, repeatedly voiced concern is that this ritual will be permanently banned, in order to preserve the physical integrity of the *stūpa*. Of grave concern to many is that new, externally imposed regulations will forbid or alter the performance of this most cherished and relied upon ritual indefinitely. This is not merely a matter of adjusting to new rules within a monastery, but in fact, threatens to completely disrupt their ability to affect change in their *kammic* fates and those of their ancestors. It is no wonder that this possibly life-threatening disruption is a source of great anxiety.

The custom has already been curtailed for the past four years, since the stupa cannot be ascended while it is being renovated and scaffolding is up. Since these improvements are considered meritorious and beneficial to the monastery, and therefore the town as a whole, the interruption has been generally accepted. If, however, once the scaffolding is down, revealing the

principal *chedi* in all its glory, and devotees are prevented from resuming their ritual, they will be profoundly upset. This *chedi* is not merely for display or preservation; it is integral to their local custom, which is also tied to their very identity as Buddhists.

Wat Phra That is predicated on the way it is used and how practitioners create meaning within it. This is the case when activities are quotidian and ubiquitous (e.g., making offering, entering pacts, propitiating objects and images), and when traditional customs that occur more infrequently are celebrated (e.g., the cloth-wrapping ceremony, performances of Southern Thai dance associated with the Thai version of the *Ramayana*, the *Ramakien*). The monastery plays a foundational role in the value system of local Buddhists since it is the place where they participate in their community socially, and for some, economically. Of course, the monastery is also integral to the way devotees engage in their Buddhist practices. The danger of losing the ability to act in the ways perceived most religiously efficacious is nothing short of a threat on much of their way of knowing how to be in the world in a meaningful way.

Lourdes Arizpe argues that ritual can be used to reinforce commitment and loyalty to each other in a community, what she calls ritual's "interaction value." This is the "creation of value through the interaction between individuals or communities that creates or reinforces commitment, understanding, and tolerance." This type of ritual value is not instrumental, or "geared toward achieving a particular goal," as it is the "interaction itself that is the goal." The value is derived from being together, and is "understood as the basic substance that society is made of."<sup>59</sup> The loss of this interaction value is also feared in the disappearance of the cloth-wrapping ceremony, since in many ways it is thought that Nakhon will cease being Nakhon if the ritual can no longer be celebrated the way it has been since time immemorial. One elderly

---

<sup>59</sup> Arizpe 2013: 44

volunteer at Wat Phra That expressed this sentiment when he articulated that the ceremony is not, in fact, primarily about Buddhism, even though it serves to inspire “faith” (*sata*). Rather, it is the most “culturally” important custom of the region, because it helps maintain ties between families, who make a point of coming together from far and wide annually while also bringing the townspeople together. For many, there is an inextricable link between Nakhon’s history, Wat Phra That, generations of families, and the cloth-wrapping ceremony itself. What is at stake is not simply the ritual and the benefits it may yield, but the entire sense of community and tradition — the interaction value — that is predicated on it. So, while officials tout the necessity of UNESCO to preserve Wat Phra That, Nakhon’s customs and Thai Buddhism for future generations, these opponents fear the designation would, in fact, disrupt the generational continuity, sense of community, and unique Buddhist tradition maintained through the cloth-wrapping. This ritual is often described as “ancient” (*piti boran*) and is considered a “*prapheni thongthin Nakhon Si Thammarat*” (“an indigenous custom/tradition of Nakhon”), and so is cherished more than any other. Processional *phra bot* are also used in Northeastern Thailand, most depicting scenes from the *Vessantara Jataka* or the tale of Phra Malai, but residents of Nakhon consider their devotional ritual wholly indigenous and distinct.

There are historical and narrative precedents for the tradition. The importance of cloth in Buddhism generally is attested to in the earliest stone sculptures at Bharhut, Sanchi, and Bodhi Gaya.<sup>60</sup> An additional reference to cloth donations is found on a Wat Maheyong stone inscription originally from Nakhon Si Thammarat,<sup>61</sup> and while fragmentary, it records the dedication or construction of religious buildings and “offerings of incense, lamps, garlands, streamers, cloth

---

<sup>60</sup> Skilling 2006: 224

<sup>61</sup> The stone was engraved in Pallava script and written in Sanskrit. The lithograph was dated by Barth to the 7<sup>th</sup> - 9<sup>th</sup> century.

baldaquins, yak-tail whisks, and Chinese banners.” Pali chronicles and inscriptions at Sukhothai also refer to donations of cloth.<sup>62</sup> And while there are no *ānisonḡ* texts (i.e., texts for blessing or consecration)<sup>63</sup> exclusively about *phra bot*, the painted cloths are referenced in *ānisonḡ* about making offerings to Buddha images.<sup>64</sup>

In the *Chronicle of Borommathat of Nakhon Si Thammarat*, the relic chronicle of Nakhon discussed in Chapter Two, one finds narrative parallels between the arrival of the Buddha’s tooth and the arrival of an auspicious *phra bot*. In both stories, travellers on their way to Sri Lanka auspiciously shipwreck near Nakhon with treasures (i.e., the Buddha relic and the painted cloth). According to the chronicle, in 1230 A.D., under the orders from King Sri Thammasokkarat (i.e., King Asoke of Nakhon), the reliquary’s construction had just been completed. Before the formal consecration of the *chedi*, however, he learns of a shipwreck near the town. At the site of the crash, the painted cloth is retrieved and the people offer it to their king, who decides to take the cloth and wrap it around the newly constructed *stūpa* as an offering to the Buddha relic.<sup>65</sup> While not necessarily indicating the historical origin of the ritual, this historiography highlights the importance of the connection between the Buddha relic and cloth-wrapping in Nakhon.

The largest cloth-wrapping celebration is held on Makha Bucha day, during the third lunar month (i.e., most often between the end of January and the beginning of March), when many thousands of people from far and wide flock to Nakhon. This Buddhist holiday commemorates the mass ordination of 1,250 *arhants*, given by the Buddha less than a year after

---

<sup>62</sup> Skilling 2006: 224-225

<sup>63</sup> See Swearer (2004) for specific examples and translations of this type of text. Swearer writes that the *ānisonḡ* genre, “blessing texts,” are “often attached as a coda that affirms the meritorious blessing of copying, reading, or listening to the text in question [ . . . ] they may appear independently, usually to be recited at the occasion dictated by its [i.e., in the title of the *ānisonḡ*] subject matter” (ibid.: 60). They may also “deal with topics such as the benefits of entering the monkhood, presenting robes to the monks, and listening to the *Vestantara Jātaka*,” and the copying of manuscripts (Veidlinger 2006: 189).

<sup>64</sup> Skilling 2006: 249

<sup>65</sup> Wyatt (1975)

his enlightenment on the ever-auspicious full moon. On this day, it is said that the Buddha preached the *ovadapatimokha*, or the principle of ceasing from evil, doing what is good, and cleansing the mind. The second largest *hae pha khuen that* is on Wisakha Bucha day, held on the full moon of the seventh lunar month, to celebrate the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and his eventual passing into *parinibbāna*. For Makha Bucha day, thousands gather from far and wide, filling the streets of Nakhon in order to participate in the cloth-wrapping ceremony at Wat Phra That. Fewer people attend during Wisakha Bucha day, although the monastery is full from early in the morning until late in the evening when the triple circumambulation of the monastery is performed while carrying candles.<sup>66</sup>

Throughout the day, beginning around sunrise when food is offered to monks from surrounding monasteries in a large tent set up in the courtyard of Wat Phra That, Buddhist practitioners come and wrap cloth around the base of the main stupa and its surrounding 158 minor *chedi*. Long lines of practitioners hoisting the cloth above their heads fill the courtyard. Traditionally, these two Buddhist holidays afford devotees the rare opportunity to climb the stairway in the relic chamber, which leads to the elevated base of the *stūpa*. It is then circumambulated three times, as the cloth is wrapped during the first pass, but continues to be touched on the final two laps. On all other days of the year, entrance to this part of the *chedi* is restricted, and so these festival days are highly anticipated. They are a chance to make merit, enter into pacts (*ko bon gae bon*), and make requests and wishes for oneself, their family, and their ancestors. I spoke with one woman, who comes from Northeastern Thailand every year to perform the ceremony with her daughter and granddaughter, who live in Nakhon. Now that her

---

<sup>66</sup> In the May of 2016, I participated in the Wisakha Bucha day celebrations at Wat Phra That. I have never attended the Makha Bucha day festivities, although I have collected local magazine articles about them and spoken to locals about the annual event.

aging mother can no longer make the trip, it is even more important that she does, so she can perform the ritual on her behalf. Additionally, people often describe feelings of heightened happiness, calmness, and satisfaction even in a sea of dense crowds. Since the ritual is considered an “ancient, Nakhon tradition,” locals consider it particularly efficacious.

Traditionally a white, painted cloth (*phra bot*)<sup>67</sup> depicting scenes from the Buddha’s life would have been used for the procession.<sup>68</sup> In contemporary practice, however, devotees offer long pieces of vibrant orange and daffodil yellow cloth, two colors immediately associated with monks’ robes. Although used less frequently red or white cloth may also be offered. Before forming in lines and hoisting the cloth above their heads, many practitioners write various wishes for themselves or their family members, alive or deceased, on the cloth, which is then wrapped around the principal *chedi* or any of the smaller ones surrounding it. For devotees whose families have lived in Nakhon for generations, ashes of deceased family members may be entombed in one of the smaller *stūpas* on the grounds. The wrapping of the cloth is then a way to honor these ancestors, and if deemed necessary, make merit for them. For example, while celebrating Wisakha Bucha, I met a group of three middle-aged devotees from Bangkok, who were visiting their elderly grandmother who lives in Nakhon. She happily chewed betel nut as we spoke. When they are in from out of town, the four of them come to Wat Phra That to wrap cloth and spend time at the secondary *stūpa* that has been in their family for generations; it now contains the ashes of the mother of the siblings from Bangkok.

---

<sup>67</sup> Besides painted cloth (Thai: *bot*; Pali: *citrapata*) there are types of cloth (*pata*) throughout the Buddhist world include banners (*dhaja*) and streamers (*patākā*). Cloth paintings are found throughout Buddhist world in Tibet, China, Japan, Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, and Burma, although Skilling has not found evidence of cloth painting in Vietnam (Skilling 2006: 240).

<sup>68</sup> When I attended, five traditional, painted *phra bot* were placed inside the relic chamber near the end of the Wisakha Bucha day celebrations, although only a few people were allowed to enter with them. Prior to being offered they were each was set before a large photos of a member of the royal family (Rama IV, Queen, Prince and two Princesses). They were kept on their spools, not unrolled. During Makha Bucha celebrations a few traditional *phra bot* may be unraveled and included in the procession to Wat Phra That.

While the aforementioned Buddhist holidays are when the largest groups gather to formally celebrate the cloth-wrapping ceremony, the event takes place on a smaller scale on a near daily basis. Since pilgrims and other visitors may only have the opportunity to come to Wat Phra That at other times throughout the year, when they are there, they often wrap cloth around smaller *stūpa* or the lower base of the main *chedi*.<sup>69</sup> In this way, people participate in the Nakhon custom throughout the year.

I spoke with two female merchants whose views summed up many circulating concerns. They work in the market connected to the ground of Wat Phra That and were most anxious about having to change “ancient customs” if new rules prohibiting the cloth-wrapping ceremony were enforced; the *chedi*, they dreaded, would become just an object to be preserved and not one to be utilized. Others expressed this similarly when emphasizing that Wat Phra That is still very much a “living” or “community” site. While not referencing UNESCO Operational Guidelines specifically, within them one can find regulatory basis for this apprehension. The guidelines stipulate that the “protection and management of World Heritage properties should ensure that their Outstanding Universal Value, including the conditions of integrity and/or authenticity at the time of inscription, are sustained or enhanced over time.”<sup>70</sup> The monastery’s manager told me that there would be no disruption in the usage of the monastery, and the cloth-wrapping ceremony is lauded in the Tentative List documents and the Rajabhat booklet. However, these assurances do little to persuade skeptical locals. As a site that is touched, circumambulated, and has materials regularly added to it (e.g., gold fleck, flowers, cloth, etc.), how will its “integrity” and “authenticity” be defined and by whom? Will the preservation of the materiality of the

---

<sup>69</sup> The base of the central *chedi* is accessed through stairs in the relic chamber and is only accessible during special occasions. The lower base is at ground level, under roofing, and accessible daily.

<sup>70</sup> UNESCO 2016: 19

central *chedi* (especially after so much time and expense has been recently invested in it) and other objects be prioritized over local rituals that admittedly put its physical condition at some risk? Besides the cloth-wrapping ritual, which is performed on a smaller scale daily, will devotees continue to be allowed to apply gold fleck to Buddha statues and other structures throughout the premises (e.g., the stone elephants in the lower base that are popular recipients of the golden square offering)?

Other changes in the material culture of the monastery have already caused great disturbances, irritation, and trepidation. During the 2018 Thai New Year celebration (Songkran), two large, bright green and gold *nāga* (*nak*) statues were added about midway up on the principal *chedi*'s exterior, under the scaffolding. In an apt example of the ongoing power struggle within the community, this sparked outrage. On a popular Facebook page about all things Nakhon,<sup>71</sup> a single post with a photo of the newly installed *nāga* figures garnered over 1,000 reactions and nearly 500 comments before it was eventually deleted. While some comments were positive, most expressed skepticism, concern, and anger about adding the new figures to the outside of the *chedi*. One commenter asked, “What is happening to the relic *chedi* (*phra that*) of our city?”<sup>72</sup> While someone else, simply said, “Take it away.”<sup>73</sup> Others were merely upset at the placement, suggesting *nāga* belong at entranceways. It is unclear whether or not the figures were removed due to public pressure, or if they were always intended to be a short-term adornment, as some commented that the *nāga* figures were a special decoration intended only for the duration of the

---

<sup>71</sup> The group name is *prathetkon* and people post about anything and everything happening around the province – cultural celebrations, Buddhist activities, food, accidents, construction, entertainment, news, and of course, posts about Wat Phra That.

<sup>72</sup> *mangoetarai khuengapongphrathathaengmuangnakhonbanrao*

<sup>73</sup> *aomanokpaikrap*

Songkran celebration.<sup>74</sup> In any case, their removal was met with glee. The two figures were taken down by April 20, a few days after the end of the observance of the New Year; in the process, they were broken and posts showing the much-maligned *nāga* figures, now in multiple pieces, garnered many “likes.” As is evident, material changes to the monastery are taken quite seriously.

Following Foucault, Daniel Miller writes, “the study of material culture often becomes an effective way to understand power, not as some abstraction, but as the mode by which certain forms or people become realized, often at the expense of others.”<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, Richard Davis writing on the biographies of objects argues that the “‘past’ [. . .] exists only as it is incarnated and reincarnated in memories, texts, objects, language, and our ongoing collective activity of reconstructing. Nor is the past that is embodied in an object a fixed quality. It comes to be transformed as its audience and the circumstances in which it is encountered are themselves transformed. The historical significance of an object may itself be reconstituted historically.”<sup>76</sup> Memories of the past are situated in wider contexts (e.g., national politics within regional and global milieus), while being impacted by the dynamics of present day and local concerns, and they become embodied in material objects. We have already seen the serious concerns surrounding the materiality and use of the principal *chedi*, and how these are tied to both the town’s history and to those of individuals and families. Furthermore, the desire for the World Heritage brand and the processes involved in seeking it represent a distinct way of remembering and presenting the past as it is embodied throughout Wat Phra That — the UNESCO brand, when granted, becomes a concrete way a place’s identity is marked and remembered. It also

---

<sup>74</sup> If this is the case, it does seem a bit odd to go through the effort of installing images under scaffolding, only to have them be obscured by the same scaffolding.

<sup>75</sup> Miller 2005: 19

<sup>76</sup> Davis 1997: 85 (cited in Levine 2005: 313)

involves literal reconstruction and transformation of the space itself through renovations and repairs. In the same vein, we now turn to a final example, which elucidates how shifting materials within the space are impacting local propitiation.

More than simply making merit, lay people, through their relationships with material objects and participation in various acts of ritual propitiation, feel they are helping to fulfill their responsibility to protect (*raksa*) against the predicted, inevitable erosion of Buddhism. The cyclical nature of time and our present era (i.e., *kali yuga*, a period of strife, violence, and decline) ensure that Buddhism itself will come to an inglorious end as devout laity, the *sangha* and Buddhist texts gradually disappear.<sup>77</sup> However, people are not powerless as this decline in piety inches its way forward through the march of time; it is quite the contrary. Each Buddhist can do their part, however subtle and perhaps seemingly inconsequential to take care of the religion and ensure its longevity. For example, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century scribes vigorously copied palm-leaf manuscripts in an effort to preserve the physical bastions of the *dhamma* for as long as possible.<sup>78</sup> Today in Nakhon, this localized notion of responsibility is claimed by those on each side of the UNESCO debate and embodied in the performance of both quotidian and less frequent Buddhist rituals and customs at Wat Phra That.

In Chapter Three, I argued that objects, statues, structures, and Buddha relics are physical harbingers of the immaterial, Buddhist potency that remains in the world. All of these are joined in a collective network, which increases their potential to act efficaciously in this world. To be sure, a relic of the Buddha automatically increases the power-store and potential of surrounding objects. Nonetheless, the entire relational network, including the potency of the relic itself, is

---

<sup>77</sup> With the dawn of a new era and the coming of the next Buddha Meitriya, Buddhism will be reborn. As with all things, the Buddhism of today is impermanent.

<sup>78</sup> A popular trope in the colophons of Northern Thai manuscripts includes the aim of preserving Buddhism for 5,000 years.

sustained via various practices. Ultimately, these devotional activities and practices serve to preserve the Buddhist teachings (*dhamma*) and tradition (*sāsana*) as practitioners are continually reinvesting in and bolstering this complex network at material nodes; in the process, wholesome mentalities are cultivated, and righteous practices encouraged.

Moreover, when we consider the importance of personal relationships formed with individual objects within the space,<sup>79</sup> we can further empathize with those worried about their monastery. In an attempt to make the monastery more presentable for UNESCO consideration, some of the most beloved statues of local heroes of legend were relocated from a prominent position near the entrance of the monastery to a relatively obscure location in the back courtyard. These images include Hemachala and Thonthakuman, the brother and sister who transported the Buddha relic to Nakhon from India, Lady White Blood, a mythological founder of the city, and King Asoke of Nakhon. Prior to 2015, if one entered from the parking lot or one of three main front gates, they would have to walk past these images on their way to the relic. As is often the case, immediately upon entering the monastic grounds, incense, candles, flowers, and gold fleck are acquired and then used in quotidian acts of propitiation. Thus, these statues not only received these offerings and the chants of devotees, but visitors also had a chance to read, or at least skim, the placards next to the images. There, they could learn, at the very least, the names of the beloved local heroes, and if they read further, a bit of the story about the relic's harrowing journey to Nakhon.<sup>80</sup>

A low, stone fence encircles the Ordination Hall, and separates a lightly wooded courtyard from the consecrated space. This building is often closed, unless of course, the

---

<sup>79</sup> See Chapter Three, where I argue that we must study the variety of relationships between persons, images, and objects within the monastic space.

<sup>80</sup> I do not want to over-exaggerate the didactic function of placards, since often they are not read at all, are barely skimmed, or the reader forgets the specifics of one as they continue to read more throughout the monastery.

ordination of monks or novices is taking place, and so visitors may not even venture all the way in that direction; if they do, it is often because there are food and beverage stands near by, or they are walking to the market, and are thus done propitiating images. The statues now reside on a raised platform in that rear courtyard area and are difficult to see if one is not looking for them. I asked many visitors about the siblings, the story of the relic, and about the veneration of these statues. Many did not know what I was referring to. In 2013, at the very least, visitors would point to the nearby statues and acknowledge their existence and possibly importance. In one way then, in an attempt to create a heritage site, popular representations of that very heritage have been rendered largely obfuscated. This reorganization of materials within the space has changed the way not only locals, but also Thai pilgrims and others interact with the space in common acts of propitiation. As most ordinary visitors no longer visit these images at all, they no longer contribute to the devotional care and attention functional images require.<sup>81</sup>

This change is a cause of concern for locals, who are worried about the decrease in attention being paid to the images. A couple older men, who pass their days playing chess and smoking cigarettes in pavilions in the shady courtyard, explained that these images are inherently connected to the town and so have a greater interest in protecting it and its residents. Thus, if the images are not properly tended to, their ability to protect the town and grant boons is hindered. Like the central *chedi*, the statues are meant to be engaged with. They are also worthy of attention, which has now been diminished, for the sake of what, many remain unsure.

---

<sup>81</sup> A Facebook post on October 6, 2018 indicated that the image of King Thaksin was going to be moved from its prominent spot near the Chanting Hall. The post also mentions the aforementioned images that have already been moved to the back courtyard. Two days after the initial post lamenting these changes, it had already garnered over 1,200 “likes” and over a hundred comments, most of which express concern about moving all these images. One commenter lamented, “There’s no need for the World Heritage Site. The heritage of the people of Nakhon is being moved, for what? For whom?”

## Conclusion

Travel is sure to continue increasing to Nakhon whether or not World Heritage status is granted, and so too the relationships and interconnectedness of people from various communities throughout the globe. Yet, one thing is certain: the World Heritage application process has already brought much change to this community, and if the designation is granted more is sure to come. Ashley Thompson has astutely identified a “general axiom,” which postulates that “culture, on the one hand, and threats to culture, on the other, are not simply antithetical forces.”

This being the case:

A certain cultural drive gains its urgency and to a degree its raw materials precisely from rupture or the threat or rupture in a cultural tradition [. . .] cultural vitality is never a question of simply conserving or preserving objective cultural products, but rather resembles a process of managing loss, a sort of ongoing healing process in which the new grows out of gaping wounds in the old, the implications for cultural curators of all kinds could not be more profound.<sup>82</sup>

What we see at Wat Phra That is this precise dynamic unfolding; parties on each side the debate exalt the preservation of culture and Buddhism itself as their highest goal in what they perceive as the threat of imminent loss. For now, we will have to wait and see what grows anew and what will disappear in the cracks of the rupture.

---

<sup>82</sup> Thompson 2008: 179-180

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Outside the city center and near Nakhon's city museum is a sculpture park portraying the major events in the life of the Buddha. Walking through the outdoor scenes, one sees two portrayals of the eventual Awakened One's miraculous first seven steps upon birth. Commemorating the event, there is also a replica of Asoke's pillar at Lumbini, complete with inscription. His enlightenment is celebrated with sandstone reliefs, one showing him and *Mae Thorani* defeating Mara and his army and another of the serene, seated Buddha. There are even replicas of the pagoda at Bodh Gaya, and the Dhamekh stupa at Saranath, where the Buddha gave his first sermon in the Deer Park. Other life events, like the Buddha receiving food after sitting in meditation for seven days to attain enlightenment, as well as his death, marked by a pond and a *don chik* tree (*barringtonia acutangula*, Freshwater Mangrove) under which he is said to have passed into *nibbana*. The important moments surrounding the life of the Buddha continue with his relics, and so the park contains a small, replica Indian-style *stūpa*. Inside the white, domed building are eight large red and gold painted frames containing depicted scenes from the tale of the relic's journey to the Siamese beach, back to Sri Lanka, its return to Nakhon, and its eventual enshrinement in the Great Reliquary. As part of the sculpture park, the relic's adventures to Nakhon continue the story of the Buddha. But, the sculpture park does more than that. It engages the viewers who walk through its paths. It connects Nakhon's Buddhist historiography to India and Sri Lanka, reminding us of the translocal communities that have helped shaped this Thai town. It reinforces the vital importance of Hemachala and

Thonthakuman, while promoting the centrality and importance of Wat Phra That. Once again, it is materials illuminating and crafting a variety of networks and agents.

As the above example reminds, Nakhon and Wat Phra That are closely associated with the sea and this is reflected in narrative and material constructions. Indeed, it is not only the royal siblings and the tooth relic that auspiciously arrive on the crystalline beach after a shipwreck on the high seas, but also the first cloth used to wrap the great reliquary after its construction. Additionally, Nakhon's Sihing<sup>1</sup> Buddha (*Phra Phuttha Sihing* or *Phra Sing*; "Lion Buddha,"<sup>2</sup>) image also arrived by sea, and in one account, by shipwreck. This is the most famous Buddha image associated with the town, and the one said to be modeled on the original likeness of the historic Buddha.<sup>3</sup> Places need powerful materials, and miraculous or triumphant arrivals are both an indication of an object's potency, as well as its inherent destiny to be connected to a particular place. The monastery's most important object, the relic of the Buddha, came via shipwreck; so too did the object directly associated with the town and monastery's most important Buddhist, communal, and familial ritual; and third, the town's most renowned image, the Sihing Buddha, also survived a trip from Sri Lanka on the high seas.

Nakhon's Sihing image is now housed near the city center between the city hall and the provincial courthouse, but it is brought to Wat Phra That during the celebration of the Thai New Year, when throngs of visitors line up to ritually bathe the image (*phithi song nam phra puttha*

---

<sup>1</sup> It is possible that "*Sihinga*" is a "made-up proper name," that recalls the Sankrit *sinha*, "lion," as well as the Pali *sihala*, "Ceylon" (Woodward 2005: 56).

<sup>2</sup> The lion is a symbol of Gotama Buddha, as well as the people of Lanka.

<sup>3</sup> The matter of creating this "original likeness" of the Buddha further complicates this issue. According to legend, the Sihing image was made from a wondrous recreation of an image of the historical Buddha long after his passing. For example, in the *Jinakālamāli*, seven hundred years after the passing of the Buddha, twenty arahants lived on Lanka. The king visits the elder of that order to ask if anyone saw the Buddha during his visits to the island. At the precise moment of his inquiry, the king of the *nāga* appears in the guise of an ordinary youth and creates a "likeness of the Buddha." After seven days and nights of venerating this image, the king orders artisans to make a beeswax replica of the miraculous projection and fill it with an "alloy of molten tin, gold and silver" (Tambiah 1984: 236).

*sihing*). The bronze image is dated between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>4</sup> With this small but mighty statue, we see another way local, regional, and global networks are created. There are multiple Sihing images in Thailand, including most famously, one at Wat Phra Sing Woramahawihan (Wat Phra Sing Luang) in Chiang Mai and one in the Phutthaisawan Chapel at the National Museum in Bangkok.<sup>5</sup> The Sihing image in Nakhon, claimed by the town's residents to be the original (like is done in Chiang Mai, Bangkok and elsewhere), is the only in Nakhon Si Thammarat style.<sup>6</sup> According to Tambiah, the Sihing image "has a momentous significance in Thailand, because it (like the Emerald Buddha) is associated in Thai traditions with the first coming the 'pure' Pali Buddhism from Polonnaruva in Sri Lanka to Sukhodaya in Thailand (and Pagan in Burma) in the thirteenth century. In the Thai collective consciousness, the coming of this pure Buddhism and the founding of the first Thai kingdoms are cotemporal and interwoven."<sup>7</sup> Again, a network is expanded beyond the southern peninsula, although stylistically none of three prominent Sihing images in Thailand show any indication of Sri Lankan origin.

---

<sup>4</sup> Munro-Hay 2001: 308

<sup>5</sup> Tambiah writes there are five or six images in Thailand, although in addition to Nakhon's image, the ones listed here are most famous (Tambiah 1984: 238). The fifteenth century image in Chiang Mai is in Lanna style and the image in Bangkok is in Sukhothai style (Munro-Hay 2001: 309).

<sup>6</sup> Tambiah says the image is in Ayutthayan style (ibid.: 233). However, the face is more closely associated the Nakhon Si Thammarat style. According to the National Museum in Bangkok, in the Nakhon style, "The general characteristics resemble those of early Chiangsen image [sic]. The difference, however, lies in the broader and flatter face with thicker lips. The end of the Nakhon Si Thammarat robe is also large and divided into many folds. This style is portrayed in one attitude: subduing Mara in the posture of sitting with crossed legs. Most of the Nakhon Si Thammarat images were found in the south of Thailand and might have received the Indian Pala influence through Java. This type of image was probably very popular between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D." (National Museum, Bangkok: 31). Munro-Hay agrees that Nakhon's Sihing image is in Nakhon style, as it "has been called the supreme example of the *khanom thom* (plump/chubby) style" (National Museum, Bangkok: 308).

<sup>7</sup> Tambiah 1984: 232



**Image 6.1:** Devotees ritually bath Nakhon’s Sihing Buddha image while celebrating the Thai New Year (photo by author)

While the Sihing image is afforded great prestige in contemporary thought and practice, its story is sparse in the local *Crystal Sands* chronicles. There, when King Asoke begins building the city with a great reliquary as its centerpiece (before receiving the request from Aśoka of India for the 84,000 relics), the Sihing Buddha image leaves Lanka, crosses the sea, and arrives on Nakhon’s beach. In Version A, “malevolent spirits [*phi suea*], demons [*phi phrai*], and mermaids [*ngoek ngu*] had been attracted by its radiance” and, presumably after the vessel carrying it wrecked, it “floated up” to arrive on a Siamese shore (i.e., it travels to an island called “Pinang” and then to the “Crystal Isle of the monks.” In Version B, the image traverses the sea from Lanka, lands on Pinang island, and then “crossed over” (like Hemachala and Thonthakuman had done) to the same beach on which the Great Reliquary was to be built.<sup>8</sup> The image makes a second appearance in Version B, which states that in 1196 of the Mahasakaraja Era (i.e., 1274

---

<sup>8</sup> Wyatt 1975: 78-79

CE<sup>9</sup>), after the death of King Asoke and the abandonment of the city the Sihing image was “enshrined in the reliquary for seven days” by a ruler named Phya Sri Saiynarangka, before it “departed” Nakhon for Chiang Mai.<sup>10</sup> These chronicles do not account for the return of the image to Nakhon.<sup>11</sup>

According to a printed account from 1986, the Sihing image was made in Lanka 700 years after the death of the Buddha. Later, the northern ruler, King Ramkhamhaeng, was desirous of a *saksit* and beautiful Buddha image, and so he asked a favor from his contemporary, King Asoke of Nakhon. The king in the south agreed to send a royal envoy to request the image from the Lankan king. The image was boarded onto a boat (there is no mention of a shipwreck), and eventually enshrined in Nakhon for seven days. After that time, Asoke invited the local artisans to come venerate the image. They then make a copy, which is sent to Sukhothai.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the Sihing image in Nakhon is inextricably connected to King Asoke, who (along with the Sihing image) is believed to have established Theravāda Buddhism in the southern peninsular region, and with another prominent center of Buddhism.

The *Jinakālamālī* accounts for Sihing image currently in residence in Bangkok. There, King Ramkhamhaeng of Sukhodaya (Sukhothai) had been told about the wondrous Sihing image by the king of Nagara Śri Dharmarāja (Nakhon). Upon hearing the request from the envoy sent by the Siamese kings, the Sinhalese king allows the image to come to Thailand. En route, the boat carrying the image collides with a rock and wrecks, but miraculously, the image remains afloat on a single piece of wood. The plank carrying the precious cargo drifts for three days,

---

<sup>9</sup> This is nearly a hundred years after the first mention and date of 1098 MS (1176-1177 CE) so the dating is a bit confusing.

<sup>10</sup> Wyatt 1975: 87

<sup>11</sup> While the image in Nakhon is likely to be the oldest of the three prominent images in Thailand today, these local chronicles acknowledge that the image departed without indicating how it returned.

<sup>12</sup> Paknam: 355

while the power of the *nāga* kings brings it to the waters near Nakhon. Then, following the directives of his auspicious dream, the king of Nakhon boards a ship to look for the image, which he finds. King Ramkhamaeng, after receiving word of the images arrival, travels to Nakhon, retrieves the images, and brings it back to Sukhothai.<sup>13</sup> From there, the image is moved around what is now central and northern Thailand, traversing great distances and being possessed by various rulers, before it arrives at its current location. During these adventures, two copies of the image are made under the orders of King Mahabrahma, ruler of Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. He has these installed in two cities within his kingdom, while keeping the original in the capital. This acknowledgement of the creation of duplicates would call into question the authenticity of other images by those who claimed to possess the true Sihing Buddha (*Sihingbuddharūpa*). One of these claimants is Nakhon.

While the *Jinakālamālī* account does not leave a Sihing image in Nakhon, it does lend credence to the notion that Nakhon was an important source of Buddhism for Sukhothai.<sup>14</sup> Again, we see a translocal network established through the utilization of narrative and materials. Rather than merely being “intimately connected with the imperatives of kingship and kingdom making,” and for “distributing the charisma of the image at different points in the kingdom”,<sup>15</sup> the Sihing image establishes a historiographical connection between two important Buddhist locales. Interestingly, in the paintings in the sculpture park discussed above, the heroic relic-bearing siblings are depicted floating in a turbulent sea, clinging onto a single plank of wood — just as the Sihing image is said to have done in the *Jinakālamālī*. And so we find another

---

<sup>13</sup> Prince Damrong, writing between the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, placed the first landing of the Sihing image in Nagara Śri Dharmarāja (i.e., Nakhon Si Thammarat), and from there claims it was taken to Sukhothai between 1277 and 1317 by King Rāmkhamaeng (Tambiah 1984: 233).

<sup>14</sup> Tambiah tracks twelve different moves the Sihing image makes before its arrival in Bangkok. One of these stops is in Luang Phrabang, in modern day Laos (ibid.: 235).

<sup>15</sup> ibid.: 236

connection in the vast expanse of networks that connects different times, places, materials, texts, and people. Another dissertation could surely be written on the history, historiography, and contemporary devotional practices surrounding the various Sihing images of Thailand.



**Image 6.2:** Hemachala and Thonthakuman are shown clinging to a plank of wood after their ship capsizes (photo by author)

I chatted with an approximately 30-year-old staff member one day as she was working in the *vihara* for the replica of the Buddha's footprint. We both welcomed the machine-produced breeze from a nearby fan. She told me that while Wat Phra That is the paramount monastery in the region ("Everyone knows about Wat Phra That," she said), Nakhon's Sihing Buddha is the most exceptional image. In fact, she told me, most locals have a replica Sihing image in their home. Even the Nakhon museum has a copy named "Phra Phutta Sihing" that is dated to 1694. Indeed, the Sihing image has been duplicated an uncountable number of times. While these replicas are not imbued with the same amount of potency as the originals, they have extended the nodal network into the homes and onto the private alters of devotees, museums, and elsewhere. As we see, the networks of Buddhist materiality continue to develop and materials and practitioners interact, and the potency generated by these networks is utilized, revitalized, and expanded.

Throughout my research I have asked many people how many versions of the local chronicles exist, and almost universally people reply that there are far too many to name. Many people have learned the story at home from parents and grandparents, and so the stories have become personalized or developed over time. Additionally, local children take family outings and attend school field trips to Wat Phra That (some of these are extended multi-night stays), and so there learn the main plot lines of the relic's coming to Nakhon. Extant textual versions of the chronicle differ from the narrative presented in the local museum, for example. In the museum, crows rather than ancient robots powered by an esoteric formula guard the relic. Differing accounts are seen as a natural development and incongruous stories are paid no mind. As we saw in Chapter Three, it is also widely acknowledged that there are too many Buddha relics in existence to possibly keep track of them all. And some images, like the three discussed in Chapter Four, have multiple identities and there is no contradiction or confusion found in this.

This acceptance of duality, ambiguity, and contradiction is necessarily coupled with the idea that there is no single text, image, or relic that can relate the immense potency of the Buddha and his subsequent followings. Instead, this seeming laxity forces us to look at the networks that come to comprise these individual items, places, and those who interact with them. When these networks are perceived as being exalted or threatened by a potential new global brand, the result is impassioned arguments on both sides. And so, this dissertation has aimed to make it clear that it is only through these networks that we may begin to understand Thai Buddhist monasteries and the materiality that is so integral to their functioning.

APPENDIX ONE

TABLE 1: TOOTH RELIC NARRATIVES COMPARED

Chapter 4 of the <i>Dāṭhāvamsa</i> (Lankan chronicle) <sup>16</sup>	<i>Crystal Sands</i> , Version A, Episode 1 <sup>17</sup>	<i>Crystal Sands</i> , Version B, Episode 1
King Paṇḍu defeats King Khiradhāra, King Paṇḍu gives the tooth relic to King Guhasiva, who returns to his own city with the Tooth Relic (vv. 286-289)	"Originally, the capital city was mo'añ Nagapurī. Its ruler was dāv Gośrīharāja, his queen was Devī, and they had a daughter named Hemamālā."	There is a town called Dandapurī. Kosīharāja has a daughter, Hemajālā, and a son, Dandakumāra.
Prince Danta comes to Kalinga to worship the relic; King Guhasiva gives his daughter, Hemamala, for marriage to Danta (vv. 290-293).		
King Khiradhara dies in battle and his nephew and army go to the city of Danta to seize the relic (v. 295).	Aṅkutarāja attacks Gośrīharāja "in order to seize the Holy Tooth Relic."	Aṅkuśarāja attacks Kosīharāja "in order to seize the Holy Tooth Relic."
King Guhasiva, fearing defeat in battle, gives the tooth relic to Danta, with the order for him to disguise himself as Brahmin and flee to Lanka with the relic. He assures him that Buddhism prospers there under King Mahasena, and thus, he will be welcomed (vv. 296-302).	Gośrīharāja calls for the siblings, Hemamālā and Dhanakumāra, and asks Danta to take the relic to Lanka for safekeeping.	
King Guhasiva dies in battle, and Danta, disguised as a Brahmin, flees the city with the tooth relic (vv. 303-304).		King Kosīharāja dies in battle and so the siblings agree to take the relic to Lanka.
	Hemamala wraps the tooth relic in her hair and boards a boat to Lanka; the boat capsizes.	Their boat capsizes.

<sup>16</sup> I used Wyatt's *Crystal Sands* translations (1975) for this summary. Any direct translations are indicated with quotation marks. All else is summary.

<sup>17</sup> I used Ven. Wegama Piyarathana's translation (2008) for this summary. Any direct translations are indicated with quotation marks. All else is summary.

Table 1 (continued)

<p>Danta "aided by the miraculous power of deities" crosses a flooded river and hides the tooth relic in a sand dune (v. 305).</p>	<p>The two "struggled through a thick forest [until] they came to a crystalline beach surrounded by the sea. There, nāñ Hemamālā and cau Dhanakumarā buried the Holy Tooth Relic in the sand."</p>	<p>With the Tooth Relic they are "washed up on a crystalline beach surround by the sea. They buried the Holy Tooth Relic on the beach, [. . .]</p>
<p>Danta returns to the city to retrieve Hemamala, and they return to the sand dune, in a thick forest, to worship the tooth relic that was deposited there (v. 306).</p>	<p>"Then, nāñ Hemamālā and cau Dhanakumāra hid themselves in a secret place."</p>	<p>[. . .] and then hid themselves in a secret place."</p>
<p>An Elder monk, flying by, sees "the thickly risen varicoloured rays of the tooth-relic emitting from that heap of sand", descends, and worships the relic. The couple tells him of their journey. He vows to protect the couple and the relic (vv. 307-309).</p>	<p>An elder arahant, Brahmadeba, flying through the air, sees the tooth relic, and comes down to venerate it. The sibilings tell him of their journey. He vows to protect the couple.</p>	<p>While flying, an elder arahant, Brahmadeba, "noticed the brilliant rays emitted" by the tooth relic, and so descends to venerate it. The sibilings relay their story to him. <b>Brahmadeba makes the prophecy: "On this beach surrounded by the sea there will in the future be a ruler named brahyā Śrī Dharmāśokarāja who will found a great city and will erect a great reliquary 37 fathoms in height."</b> He then vows to protect the couple. <b>[Bold print is parallel to Column 2, Row 15]</b></p>
<p>A <i>nāga</i>-king emerges from the river, see the rays from the relic, makes himself invisible, eats the golden casket and the relic, and coils around Mount Meru; Danta and Hemamala are distraught at the disappearance, and call to mind the monk they had met (vv. 310-314).</p>		

Table 1 (continued)

<p>The monk turns into the guise of a <i>garuda</i>, confronts the <i>nāga</i>-king, and has him return the casket and relic (vv. 315-320).</p>		
<p>The monk gives the relic back to the couple, who "taking the tooth relic upon the head," make their way to a port in India and board a ship heading for Lanka (vv. 323-326).</p>	<p>Hemamala wraps the relic in her hair and they set out for Lanka; arriving at a port in Trang (Siam) they board a ship.</p>	<p>The couple takes the relic and sets out for Lanka, going to a port in Trang (Siam). They board a ship.</p>
<p>The sea and sky turn from beautiful to chaotic as <i>nāgas</i> come to worship the tooth relic. The relic rises into the air from Hemamala's hair and emits white rays, performing a miracle. The relic descends back into her hair (vv. 327-336).</p>	<p>In the middle of the sea, "such serious events occurred as to make the boat incapable of progressing further [ . . . ]"</p>	<p>In the middle of the sea, "a supernatural occurrence took place, rendering impossible the further use of the vessel's sails."</p>
<p>The <i>nāga</i> keep the ship for one week to make offerings to the relic. Knowing the ship stuck in the sea, the couple is fearful and calls to mind the Great Elder, who in the form of a <i>garuda</i>, drives the <i>nāga</i> away (vv. 336-338).</p>	<p>The captain and crew of the ship decide to kill the couple. They bring to mind the Great Arahant "who manifested himself as a Garuḍa about 3,000 fathoms in length [damaged manuscript. . .] as all the Nāgas arose to pay their respects to the Holy Tooth Relic."</p>	<p>The crew blames the couple for the supernatural occurrence, and decides to kill them. The siblings think of the Great Elder who materializes as a <i>garuda</i>, "with wings each of which was 300 fathoms in length." The Arahant tells the crew of the boat that the King of Nāgas had come to worship the relic, "thus causing the calm" (i.e., the supernatural occurrence).</p>

Table 1 (continued)

<p>The ship sails on and arrives in Lanka, "thanks to the super-normal power of the monk." (v. 339)</p>	<p><b>Brahmadeba prophesizes, "to the beach surrounded by the sea a ruler names bañā Śrī Dharmasokarāja would come erect a great mo'añ called Nagara Nagara Śrī Dharmarāja Mahānagara; and that ruler would build a cetiya to be a Holy Reliquary, 37 fathoms high [ . . .]"</b> The couple thanks the Elder and the boat sails on. <b>[Bold print is parallel to Column 3, Row 9]</b></p>	<p>The crew was appeased and they sailed on, reaching Lanka.</p>
	<p>[NOTE: Version B, being the more complete relic history, brings the relic back to Nakhon, whereas Version A ends the story before the couple makes it back to Lanka.]</p>	<p>The "ruler of Lanka" receives the relic and sends orders to Añkuśarāja [who defeated King Guhasiva] to allow the peaceful return of the siblings, or else wage war with Lanka. He orders that the tooth relic is to be buried on the crystalline beach where the relic was concealed by the siblings. Along with the prince and princess, four great <i>brahmanas</i> board a boat and take the relic to the beach, where they split it in two; one portion is placed in crystal casket, in a golden dish and buried in the same hole where tooth relic was previously concealed. They erect a <i>cetiya</i> and "bound a <i>bhābayantra</i>" to protect it. The other portion is returned to Dandapuri (i.e., the hometown of the siblings).</p>

APPENDIX TWO

TABLE 2: NARRATIVES OF AŚOKA’S 84,000 RELICS COMPARED

1. <i>Crystal Sands</i> , Version A, Episode 3 <sup>18</sup>	2. <i>Crystal Sands</i> , Version B, Episode 3	3. <i>Lokapaññatti</i>	4. <i>Thūpavaṃsa</i> <sup>19</sup>	5. Sinhalese <i>Thūpavaṃsa</i> , 12 <sup>th</sup> century <sup>20</sup>
A letter is received from India indicating that the pious ruler, King Aśoka, has constructed 84,000 reliquaries and requests 84,000 relics from Nakhon to fill them.	A letter is received from India indicating that the pious ruler, King Aśoka, has constructed 84,000 reliquaries but that he has no relics with which to fill them.	Aśoka knows of the prediction that he will be a <i>dhammarāja</i> and erect 84,000 <i>stūpas</i> .	Aśoka approaches the Sangha asking where he can obtain the 84,000 relics, but they are unsure. Aśoka travels around, breaking open (and subsequently repairing) all the <i>cetiya</i> s throughout his land.	Aśoka receives letters from throughout his kingdom indicating that all the reliquaries have been completed; he asks, "Reverends! The eighty-four thousand monasteries that I am building are finished. How do I obtain the relics?" They reply that they know there is a "relic deposit" somewhere in the kingdom, but they don't know where. The king and 4-fold group of Buddhist sets out looking for the relics, and so break into relic shrines (and then reconstruct them).

<sup>18</sup> I used Wyatt’s *Crystal Sands* translations (1975) for this summary. Any direct translations are indicated with quotation marks. All else is summary.

<sup>19</sup> I used N.A Jaywickrama’s translation of the *Thūpavaṃsa* (1971) for this summary.

<sup>20</sup> While not discussed specifically in Chapter Two, I have offered a relevant comparison of a Sinhalese version of *Thūpavaṃsa* (Berkwitz 2007: 141-144).

Table 2 (continued)

<p>King Aśoka of Nakhon offers "a lump of gold large enough to choke a horse" to anyone who may know where the relics are located.</p>	<p>King Aśoka of Nakhon offers a sum of gold equal to "an egg big enough to choke a horse" to whoever can locate the relics.</p>	<p>Aśoka offers 1,000 pieces of coinage to whoever can locate the buried relics.</p>	<p>Aśoka asks if there is anyone who knows where the relics are buried.</p>	<p>Finally, in Rajagahā, the king asks, "Is there an elderly man or elderly woman who has previously heard of or previously seen the relic deposit at such and such a place?" No one responds affirmatively. Then, at the monastery, the king asks, "Is there a venerable one in the Great Sangha who knows where there is a relic deposit?"</p>
--	--	--	---	--

Table 2 (continued)

<p>A man of 120 years says that his father showed him where the relics were buried.</p>	<p>A man of 120 years says that when he was young his father placed flowers on the spot where the <i>cetiya</i> was located.</p>	<p>A 120 year old bhikkunī, says she may know the location since her preceptor, when she was 7, made offerings at a particular spot.</p>	<p>A 120 year old elder comes forward, saying "[. . .] when I was 7 years old, making me carry a casket of flowers and saying to me, 'Come novice, there is a <i>thūpa</i> of granite in such and such a clump of bushes, let us go there.'"</p>	<p>A 120 year old monk responds, "Great king! I do not know whether the relic deposit is at such and such a place. But look, there is one thing. When I was seven years old, my preceptor, having me bring flowers, said, 'Novice! Come here. There is a relic shrine in the middle of such and such thorny trees. Let us go to that place.' Thus having brought me along and made offerings at that place, I only know that he spoke these words, 'Novice! Keep this place in mind.'"</p>
---	--	--	--	--

Table 2 (continued)

<p>The spot is located and unearthed revealing the <i>cetiya</i>, as well as the <i>bhābayanta</i> surrounding and protecting it; thus, the king offers a "lump of gold large enough to choke a horse" to anyone who knows how to dispel the mechanical guards.</p>	<p>The spot is located and unearthed revealing the <i>cetiya</i>, as well as the <i>bhābayanta</i> surrounding and protecting it; thus, the king offers gold the size of an "egg large enough to choke a horse" to anyone who knows how to dispel the mechanical guards.</p>	<p>The spot is located and excavated, whereby <i>bhābayanta</i> surrounding and protecting the relic chamber are discovered. 1,000 coins are offered to whoever is able to destroy the mechanical guards.</p>	<p>Aśoka goes to that spot, clearing the bushes and granite. He then digs down into "the enclosed courtyard" and sees "seven precious things and the wooden figures carrying swords in their hands revolving." "Even after he had had necromancers summoned and a sacrifice conducted," Aśoka was not able to remove the relics and calls on the help of the deities.</p>	<p>The spot is excavated by removing limestone to get to the inner chambers, made of 7 precious materials and "the contraption with hands that held swords, and employing exorcists [<i>yakādurān</i>] and having made offerings to <i>yaksas</i> because those figures did not let him enter"; thus, he invokes the deities proclaiming he will establish the relics in the 84,000 monasteries.</p>
<p>A "very poor" man comes forward saying that his father had studied <i>bhābayanta</i> in Romavisaya, and that he had "his texts tattooed in ink on his legs," so that he could "use the <i>bhābayanta</i> thereafter."</p>	<p>At that time there was a man named Chāndī, whose father had studied the "arts and sciences" in Roma; after becoming "proficient" in these he had "this knowledge" tattooed on his leg and returned to Nakhon.</p>	<p>The son of the robot mechanic from "Rome" comes forward and receives the 1,000 coins.</p>		

Table 2 (continued)

<p>His father's head was cut off, but the son retrieved and retained the texts that had been tattooed.</p>	<p>"Using [the power of] the <i>bhābhayantra</i>*, [his] teacher came and cut off his head and took it away" [*this bracketed insertion by Wyatt may not be necessary, as the <i>bhābhayantra</i> could have themselves cut off his head (as in the <i>Lokapaññatti</i>)]; "that writing" the son copied and studied.</p>	<p>The robots are unable to cut him down from behind, and he successfully destroys them.</p>		
<p>They give the man the lump of gold, and retrieve the medicinal leaf prescribed in the text; they fry the leaf and dispel the <i>bhābayanta</i></p>	<p>They give the man the lump of gold; they dispel the <i>bhābayanta</i>.</p>			
<p>The heat from this act ascends to Indra, who sends Viśnu down to retrieve the relics and give them to King Aśoka in India.</p>	<p>The heat from this act ascends to Indra, who sends Viśnu down to retrieve the relics; they are divided and some are sent King Aśoka in India.</p>	<p>Entering the multiple layers of the chamber, the Kanthaka-shaped relic casket is removed.</p>	<p>Sakka sees this and sends Vissakamma to remove the "wooden figures," which he does as he is disguised as village boy. The relics are retrieved and placed in the 84,000 monasteries.</p>	<p>Śakra [Indra] sees the kings plight and summons Viśvakarma, telling him that King Dharmāśoka is trying to remove the relics to establish them in the 84,000 monasteries.</p>

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexander, Julienne. 2015. "He's Neutral." *Criminal*, Episode 15. Podcast Air Date: January 30.
- Ali, Daud. 2016. "Bhoja's Mechanical Garden: Translating Wonder Across the Indian Ocean, Circa 800-1100 CE" in *History of Religions*, vol. 55(4): 460-493.
- Anderson, Benedict. 1972. "The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture" in *Culture and Politics in Indonesia*. Claire Holt, ed. pp. 1-69. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Arizpe, Lourdes. 2015. *Culture, Diversity, Heritage: Major Studies*. New York: Springer International Publishing.
- 2013. "Singularity and Micro-Regional Strategies in Intangible Cultural Heritage" in *Anthropological Perspectives on Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Lourdes Arizpe and Cristina Amescua, eds. pp. 17-36. New York: Springer International Publishing.
- Asad, Talal. 2009. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Bausita, Julius. 2012. "Preface" in *The Spirit of Things: Materiality and Religious Diversity in Southeast Asia*. Julius Bausita, ed. pp. vii-x. Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program.
- Bausita, Julius and Anthony Reid. 2012. "Introduction" in *The Spirit of Things: Materiality and Religious Diversity in Southeast Asia*. Julius Bausita, ed. pp. 1-10. Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program.
- Becchetti, Catherine. 1991. *Le mystère dans les lettres*. Bangkok: Éditions des cahiers de France.
- Berkwitz, Stephen. 2007. *The History of the Buddha Relic's Shrine*. American Academy of Religion Texts and Translations Series. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bhattarai-Upadhyay, Vibha. 2013. "Traditions Overlooked: Re-thinking cultural heritage conservation in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal" in *Asian Heritage Management: Context, Concerns, and Prospects*. Kapila D. Silva and Neel Kamal Chapagain, eds. pp. 157-175. London: Routledge.
- Bhikkhum Dhammananda. 2004. *Bhikkhuni: The Reflection of Gender in Thai Society*. Chiang Mai: University of Chiang Mai Women's Study Center.
- Bizot, François. 1976. *Le figuier à cinq branches*. Publications de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient 107. Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient.
- Bizot, François and François Lagirarde. 1996. *La pureté par les mots*. Chiang Mai: École Française d'Extrême-Orient.

- Bizot, François and Iskar von Hinüber. 1994. *La guirlande de bijoux*. Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient.
- Cassaniti, Julia. 2015. *Living Buddhism: Mind, Self, and Emotion in a Thai Community*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Caust, Josephine and Marilena Vecco. 2017. "Is UNESCO World Heritage recognition a blessing or burden? Evidence from developing Asian countries" in *Journal of Cultural Heritage*. vol. 27: 1-9.
- Chandavij, Natthapatra and Saengchan Traikasem, eds. 2000. *Visitors Guide to the Nakhon Si Thammarat Museum*. Produced by the Office of Archaeological and National Museums, The Fine Arts Department, Ministry of Education. Bangkok: Rung Silp Printing Co.
- Chapagain, Neel Kamal. 2013. "Introduction: Contexts and Concerns in Asian Heritage Management" in *Asian Heritage Management: Context, Concerns, and Prospects*. eds. Kapila D. Silva and Neel Kamal Chapagain. pp: 1-30. London: Routledge.
- Chiu, Angela. 2017. *The Buddha in Lanna: Art, Lineage, Power, and Place in Northern Thailand*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Chuvichean, Prapat. 2004. *Phra baromthat chedi nakhonsithammarat gap ganwikhraodanbrawatisatsilaba* (Art Historical Analysis on the Relic Stupa of Nakhon Si Thammarat). Master's Thesis. Silpakorn University, Bangkok.
- Collins, Steven. 1990. "On the Very Idea of the Pali Canon" in *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, vol. 15: 89-126.
- 1998. *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 2003. "What is Literature in Pali?" in *Literary Cultures in History*. S. Pollock, ed. pp. 649-88. Oakland: University of California Press.
- 2013. "Eight Stages in the Life of a Buddha and his sāsana." Unpublished draft. (Received from author December 2013).
- Collins, Steven and Justin McDaniel. 2010. "Buddhist 'nuns' (mae chi) and the Teachings of Pali in Contemporary Thailand" in *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 44: 1373-1408.
- Cœdes, Geoge. 1963. *Angkor: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 1968. *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*. Walter F. Vella, ed. Susan Brown Cowing, trans. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

- Crosby, Kate. 2008. "Gendered Symbols in Theravada Buddhism: Missed Positives in the Representation of the Female" in *Hsuan Chuang Journal of Buddhist Studies*, vol. 9: 31-47.
- 2000. "Tantric Theravada: A bibliographic essay on the writings of François Bizot and other literature on the Yogāvacara Tradition" in *Contemporary Buddhism*, vol. Nov. issue 2:141-198.
- 2013. *Traditional Theravada Meditation and Its Modern-Era Suppression*. Hong Kong: Buddha Dharma Centre of Hong Kong.
- Davis, Richard H. 1997. *Lives of Indian Images*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- de Beron, Olivier. 2000. "Le manuel des maîtres de kammattān." PhD dissertation. Institut nationale des langues et civilisations orientales, Paris.
- Denis, Eugène, ed. and trans. 1977. *Lokapaññatti*. Paris: Lille.
- Falk, Monica Lindberg. 2008. *Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Fickle, Dorothy. 1998. *Images of the Buddha in Thailand*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Findly, Ellison Banks. 2000. *Women's Buddhism, Buddhism's Women: Tradition, Revision, Renewal*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications.
- Foster, Michael Dylan. "UNESCO on the Ground" in *UNESCO on the Ground: Local Perspectives on Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Michael Dylan Foster and Lisa Gilman, eds. pp. 1-14. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Gabaude, Louis. "A New phenomenon in Thai monasteries: the stūpa museum" in *The Buddhist Monastery: A Cross-Cultural Survey*. Pierre Pichard and François Lagirarde, eds. pp. 169-186 Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient.
- Gade, Anna. 2004. *Perfection Makes Practice: Learning, Emotion, and the Recited Qur'an in Indonesia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Geary, David. 2017. *The Rebirth of Bodh Gaya: Buddhism and the Making of a World Heritage Site*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gell, Alfred. 1998. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Goonasekera, Sunil. 2012. "Bara: Buddhist Vows at Kataragama" in *Dealing with Deities: The Ritual Vow in South Asia*. Selva J. Raj and William P. Harman, eds. pp. 107-128. Albany: State University of New York.
- Graburn, Nelson H.H. 2001. "Learning to Consume: What is Heritage and When is it Traditional?" in *Consuming Tradition, Manufacturing Heritage: Global Norms and urban Forms in the Age of Tourism*, Nezar Alsayyad, ed. pp. 68-89. London: Routledge.
- Guthrie, Elizabeth. 2004. *A Study of the History and Cult of the Buddhist Earth Deity in Mainland Southeast Asia*. PhD Dissertation. University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand.
- Harvey, Peter. 2010. "Buddha, Relics of" in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*. Damien Keown and Charles S. Prebish, eds. pp. 133–137. London: Routledge.
- Hewison, Robert. 1987. *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Ishii, Yoneo. 1986. *Sangha, State, and Society: Thai Buddhism in History*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Jahan, Shahnaj Husne. 2013. "Mapping Routes: A Journey of Buddhist into Southeast Asia." Talk given at *The Origin of Buddhism in Southeast Asia: Dhamma and Archaeology*, University of Nakhon Si Thammarat Rajabhat from January 11 to 14, pp. 1-22.
- Jayawickrama, N.A. 1971. *The Chronicle of the Thūpa and the Thūpavaṃsa: Being a Translation and Edition of Vācissartthera's Thūpavaṃsa*. Part of the series: *The Sacred Books of the Buddhists*, vol. XXVIII. London: Luzac and Company LTD.
- Johnson, Ian. "Poachers Ravaging Nearly Half of Natural World Heritage Sites" in *The Independent*, April 17, 2017.
- Kabilsingh, Chatsumarn. 1991. *Thai Women in Buddhism*. Berkeley: Parallax Press.
- (Ven) Kandarapanguwe Dhammasiri. 1991. *The Buddha Images and Pagodas in Thailand*. Bangkok: Mahachulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya Buddhist University Press.
- Kasetsiri, Charnvit. 2013. *Preah Vihear: A Guide to the Thai-Cambodian Conflict and its Solutions*. Bangkok: White Lotus Press.
- Keane, Webb. 2008. "The evidence of the Senses and the Materiality of Religion" in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 14: s110-s127.

- Kirdsiri, Kreangkrai, ed. (no date). *morodok puttha sila sathapattayakam wat phra mahathatworamahawihan nakhon si thammarat*. Given English Title: *The Buddhism Architectural Heritage of Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan, Nakhon Si Thammarat*. Publisher name: Usakne (no publishing location)
- Kuutma, Kristin. 2013. "Concepts and Contingencies in Heritage Politics" in *Anthropological Perspectives on Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Arizpe, Lourdes and Cristina Amescua, eds. pp. 1-15. New York: Springer International Publishing.
- Labadi, Sophia and Colin Long. 2010. "Introduction" in *Heritage and Globalization*. Sophia Labadi and Colin Long, eds. pp. 1-16. Routledge: New York.
- Lagiarde, François. 2001. *Gavampati-Kaccāyana: le culte et la légende du disciple ventripotent dans le bouddhisme de Thaïs*. Doctoral Dissertation. École Pratiques des Hautes Études, La Sorbonne, Paris.
- 2003. "Cultural Diversification in Thai Monasteries: the Worship of the Fat Monk" in *The Buddhist Monastery: A Cross-Cultural Survey*. eds. Pichard, Pierre and François Lagiarde. pp. 149-168. Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient.
- Landorf, C. 2009. "Managing for sustainable tourism: a review of six cultural World Heritage Sites" in *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, vol. 17 (1): 53-70.
- The Laotian Times*. (no author). <https://laotiantimes.com/2016/09/27/tourist-arrivals-to-luang-prabang-increase-by-16-annually/>. September 27, 2016.
- Learsch, J.A. 1969. *Thai (Siamese) Buddhist Sculpture*. Bangkok: Krung Siam Press.
- Levine, Gregory P.A. 2006. *Daitokuji: The Visual Cultures of a Zen Monastery*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Lumley, Robert. 1988. *The Museum Time-Machine: Putting Cultures on Display*. London: Routledge.
- Machuca, Jesús Antonio. 2013. "Challenges for Anthropological Research on Intangible Cultural Heritage" in *Anthropological Perspectives on Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Lourdes Arizpe and Cristina Amescua, eds. pp. 57-69. New York: Springer International Publishing.
- McCargo, Duncan and Ukrist Pathmanand. 2005. *The Thaksinization of Thailand*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- McDaniel, Justin T. 2006. "Liturgies and Cacophonies in Thai Buddhism" in *Aséanie*. December: 119-150.

- 2008. *Gathering Leaves & Lifting Words*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- 2009. “Philosophical Embryology: Buddhist Texts and the Ritual Construction of a Fetus” in *Imagining the Fetus*. Vanessa R. Sasson and Jane Marie Law, eds. pp. 91-106. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 2011. *Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- 2011b. “The Agency Between Images: The Relationships Among Ghosts, Corpses, Monks, and Deities at a Buddhist Monastery in Thailand” in *Material Religion*. vol. 7(2): 242-267.
- 2016. *Architects of Buddhist Leisure: Socially Disengaged Buddhism in Asian’s Museums, Monuments, and Amusement Parks*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.
- McGill, Forest. 1977. *The Art and Architecture of the Reign of King Prasattong of Ayutthaya (1629-1656)*. PhD dissertation. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.
- Miller, Daniel. 2005. “Materiality: An Introduction” in *Materiality*. Miller, Daniel, ed. pp. 1-50. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Montesano, Michael J., Pavin Chachavalpongpan, and Aekapol Chongvilaivan, eds. 2012. *Bangkok, May 2010: Perspectives on a Divided Thailand*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Muecke, Marjorie. “Female Sexuality in Thai Discourses about Maechii ('Lay Nuns')” in *Culture, Health & Sexuality*. vol. 6, no. 3, “Gender and Sexuality among Women in Thailand” (May - Jun., 2004), pp. 221-238.
- Munro-Hay, Stuart. 2001. *Nakhon Sri Thammarat: The Archeology, History and Legends of a Southern Thai Town*. Bangkok: White Lotus Press.
- nakhonnews.com/2018/03/30. March 30, 2018. (no author). “*jangwatnakhonsithammarat triamkhonyai klip bua thongkham kwa 18 kilokram*” (“Nakhon Si Thammarat Province prepares to remove and move 18 kilograms of gold lotus-shaped plates”).
- National Museum, Bangkok. 1958. *Display of the Buddha Images in Thailand at the National Museum Bangkok*. Published for the Fifth General Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists at Bangkok, Thailand.
- Norman, K.R. 1983. *Pali Literature, including the Canonical Literature in Prakrit and Sanskrit of All the Hinayana Schools of Buddhism*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

- Penth, Hans. 2004. *A Brief History of Lān Nā: Northern Thailand From Past to Present*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- Perreira, Todd LeRoy. 2012. "Whence Theravāda? The Modern Geneology of an Ancient Term" in *How Theravāda is Theravāda: Exploring Buddhist Identities*. Peter Skilling, Jason Carbine, Claudio Cicuzza, and Santi Pakdeekham, eds. pp. 443-571. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Phongpaichit, Pasuk and Christ Baker. 2005. *Thaksin: the Business of Politics*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- Pichard, Pierre. 2003. "The Thai monastery" in *The Buddhist Monastery: A Cross-Cultural Survey*. Pichard, Pierre and François Lagirarde, eds. pp. 93-118. Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient.
- Powers, John. 2009. *A Bull of a Man: Images of Masculinity, Sex, and the Body in Indian Buddhism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- (Ven) Rachawinaiwet (Chaoawat Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan). 2535 (1992). *Prawat lae Tamnan Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan Nakhon Si Thammarat. (History and Chronicles of Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan Nakhon Si Thammarat)*. Nakhon Si Thammarat: Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan.
- Raj, Selva J. and William P. Harman, eds. 2012. *Dealing with Deities: The Ritual Vow in South Asia*. Albany: State University of New York.
- Rosaldo, Renato. 2013. "Evaluation of Items on Intangible Cultural Heritage" in *Anthropological Perspectives on Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Lourdes Arizpe and Cristina Amescua, eds. pp. 37-38. New York: Springer International Publishing.
- Seeger, Martin. 2018. *Gender and the Path to Awakening: Hidden Histories of Nuns in Modern Thai Buddhism*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books/Copenhagen: NIAS Press.
- Silk, Jonathan A. 2008. *Managing Monks: Administrators and Administrative Roles in Indian Buddhist Monasticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Skilling, Peter. 2004. "Cutting across categories: The ideology of relics in Buddhism" in *Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University for the Academic Year 2004*. vol. VIII: 269-322. Tokyo: The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology, Soka University.
- 2006. "Pata (Phra Bot): Buddhist Cloth Painting of Thailand" in *Buddhist Legacies in Mainland Southeast Asia: Mentalities Interpretations and Practices*. pp. 149-166. Francois Lagirarde and Paritta Koanantakool, eds. Bangkok: École française d'Extrême-Orient.

- 2009. *Buddhism and Buddhist Literature of South-East Asia: Selected Papers by Peter Skilling*. Claudio Cicuzza, ed. Bangkok and Lumbini: Fragile Palm Leaves (Materials for the Study of the Tripitaka Volume 5).
- 2012. “The Aesthetics of Devotion: Buddhist Arts of Thailand” in *Enlightened Ways: The Many Streams of Buddhist Art in Thailand*. pp. 18-31. Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum.
- 2012b. “King Rāma I and Wat Phra Chetuphon: the Buddha-śāsanā in Early Bangkok” in Peter Skilling, Jason Carbine, Claudio Cicuzza, and Santi Pakdeekham, eds. *How Theravāda is Theravāda: Exploring Buddhist Identities*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. pp. 297-347.
- Skilling, Peter, Jason Carbine, Claudio Cicuzza, and Santi Pakdeekham, eds. 2012. *How Theravāda is Theravāda: Exploring Buddhist Identities*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Smith, Laurajane. 2006. *Uses of Heritage*. London: Routledge.
- Somswasdi, Virada and Alycia Nicholas, eds. 2003. *A collation of articles on Thai women and Buddhism*. Chiang Mai: Foundation for Women, Law, and Rural Development and Women's Studies Center, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University.
- Sopranzetti, Claudio. 2012. *Red Journeys: Inside the Thai Red-shirt Movement*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- Sørensen, Marie Louise Stig and John Carman, eds. 2009. *Heritage Studies: Methods and Approaches*. London: Routledge.
- Spiro, Melford E. 1970. *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Srisuchat, Amara. 2012. “Naming the Buddha: Thai Terms for Images of the Buddha” in *Enlightened Ways: The Many Streams of Buddhist Art in Thailand*. pp. 40-47. Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum.
- Story, Francis and Sister Vajira, trans. 1998. *Mahā-parinibbāna Sutta: The Last Days of the Buddha*. <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.16.1-6.vaji.html>.
- Stratton, Carol. 2004. *Buddhist Sculpture of Northern Thailand*. Chicago: Buppha Press.
- Strong, John S. 1992. *Legend and Cult of Upagupta: Sanskrit Buddhism in North Indian and Southeast Asia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- 2004. *Relics of the Buddha*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Sukragan, Chatchai. *Phraboromthat su morodoklok (The Great Reliquary as a World Heritage)*. 2015. Center for Art and Culture at the Rajabhat University-Nakhon Si Thammarat.
- Swearer, Donald K. 1976. *Wat Haripuñjaya: A Study of the Royal Temple of the Buddha's Relic Lamphun, Thailand*. Missoula: University of Montana.
- 1995. "A Summary of the Seven Books of the Abhidhamma" in *Buddhism in Practice*, DS Lopez, Jr., ed. pp. 336–342. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- 2004. *Becoming the Buddha: The Ritual of Image Consecration in Thailand*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- 2004b. "Signs of the Buddha in Northern Thai Chronicles" in *Embodying the Dharma: Buddhist Relic Veneration in Asia*. David Germano and Kevin Trainor, eds. pp. 145-163. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Tambiah, Stanley J. 1984. *Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets: A Study in Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism, and Millennial Buddhism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tannenbaum, Nicola. 1995. *Who Can Compete Against the World: Power-Protection and Buddhism in Shan Worldview*. Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies.
- Tentative List of the Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province for Inscription on the World Heritage List*. Submitted for inclusion by Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment. August 28, 2012. (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5752/>)
- Terweil, Barand Jan. 1975. *Monks and Magic: An Analysis of Religious Ceremonies in Central Thailand*. Lund [Sweden]: Studentlitteratur.
- thairath.co.th/content/537976. November 8, 2558 (2013). (no author). "muangkon radom kwanhenseno 'wat phramahathatworamahawihan' kuen morodoklok" (Nakhon gathers opinions on recommending that Wat Phra Mahathatworamahawihan become a World Heritage site).
- thairath.co.th/content/693306. August 17, 2556 (2013). (no author). "henchopkhotkhonborannakhadi 8 chut phramahathat muangkon chongkhuen banchimorodoklok" (Approval to search 8 archeological sites related to Wat Phra That in Nakhon for the World Heritage dossier).

thairath.co.th/content/659004. July 9, 2559 (2016). (no author). “‘*nailuang’ phraratthan 29 lan chakphuthunklao burana phrabaromthat muangkon*” (“‘King’ donates 29 million baht for restoration of Nakhon’s great *chedi*”)

Thatsanasuwan, Pramot. 1982. *Phraphuttarup lae anusawari samkhan thua prathat thai (Important Buddha Images and Monuments throughout Thailand)*. Bangkok: Kiat Sayam.

Thitsa, Khin. 1983. “*Nuns, Mediums and Prostitutes in Chiangmai: A Study of Some Marginal Categories of Women*” in Occasional Paper No. 1. Kent, UK: University of Kent at Canterbury, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies.

Thompson, Ashley. 2007. “Angkor Revisited: the State of Statuary” in *What's the Use of Art: Asian Visual and Material Culture in Context*. Jan Mrazek and Morgan Pitelka, eds. pp. 179-213. Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press.

*thi raluek ngan phraratchathan ploeng sop khun po pluen wutsak* (A Memorial for the Royally Sponsored Cremation Ceremony of Mr. Po Pluen Wutsak). 2554 (2011). Nakhon Si Thammarat: Metsai Printing House.

Tsomo, Karma Lekshe. 2000. *Innovative Buddhist Women: Swimming Against the Stream*. Richmond: Curzon Press.

United Nations Educational and Scientific Organization (UNESCO). 2016. *Operational Guidelines*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

----- 2011. *Preparing World Heritage Nominations*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Van esterik, P. 1982. “Lay Women in Theravada Buddhism” in *Women of Southeast Asia*. P. Van Esterik, ed. Occasional Paper No. 9: 42-54. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University, Center for Southeast Asian Studies..

Veidlinger, Daniel M. 2006. 2006. *Spreading the Dhamma: Writing, Orality, and Textual Transmission in Buddhist Northern Thailand*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.

Wedemeyer, Christian. 2012. *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

(Ven.) Wegama Piyarathana, ed. 2008. *Dathavamsa (with English translation)*. Published in Homagama, Sri Lanka.

White, Erick. 2014. "Possession, Professional Spirit Mediums, and the Religious Fields of Late-Twentieth Century Thailand." PhD Dissertation. Cornell University, Ithaca.

- Wilson, Liz. 1996. *Charming Cadavers: Horrific Figurations of the Feminine in Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Winichakul, Thongchai. 1997. *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Winter, Tim. 2010. "Heritage Tourism" in *Heritage and Globalization*. Sophia Labadi and Colin Long, eds. pp. 118-199. New York: Routledge.
- Woodward, Hiram W. 1997. *The Sacred Sculpture of Thailand: The Alexander B. Griswold Collection, The Walters Art Gallery*. Baltimore: The Trustees of the Walters Art Gallery.
- 2001. "Practice and Belief in Ancient Cambodia: Claude Jacques' Angkor and the Devarāja Question" in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. vol. 32(2): 249-261.
- 2005. "The Buddha Images of Ayutthaya" in *The Kingdom of Siam: The Art of Central Thailand 1350-1800*. Forrest McGill, ed. and curator, Pattaratorn Chirapravati, co-curator. Asian Art Museum, Chong-Moon Lee Center for Asian Art and Culture, and Peabody Essex Museum. pp. 47-60. Ghent: Snoeck Publishers.
- Wyatt, David K. 1975. *The Crystal Sands: The Chronicle of Nagara Śri Dharmarāja*. Southeast Asia Program, Dept. of Asian Studies, Cornell University. Data paper no. 98. Ithaca: Cornell University.
- 1976. "Chronicle Traditions in Thai Historiography" in *Southeast Asian History and Historiography: Essays presented to D.G.E. Hall*. vol. 2: 107-122.
- 2001. "Siam Relics, Oaths, and Politics in Thirteenth-century Siam" in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. vol. 32(1): pp. 3-65.