

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics>

Volume 20, 2013

*Nirvana for Sale?: Buddhism, Wealth, and the
Dhammakāya Temple in Contemporary Thailand*

Reviewed by Jordan Johnson

Arizona State University
jordan.johnson@asu.edu

Copyright Notice: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to:
cozort@dickinson.edu

A Review of *Nirvana for Sale?: Buddhism, Wealth, and the Dhammakāya Temple in Contemporary Thailand*

Jordan Johnson¹

Nirvana for Sale?: Buddhism, Wealth, and the Dhammakāya Temple in Contemporary Thailand.
By Rachelle M. Scott. Albany: SUNY Press, 2009, xiii + 242 pages, ISBN 978-1-4384-2784-3
(paperback), \$29.95, ISBN 978-1-4384-2783-6 (hardcover).

In the popular Western imagination, as well as in the minds of many people residing in Buddhist Asia, one of the truly quintessential aspects of Buddhism is that it is a tradition that fundamentally rejects materialism and the accumulation of ample wealth. Rachelle M. Scott's impressive recent book, *Nirvana for Sale?: Buddhism, Wealth, and the Dhammakāya Temple in Contemporary Thailand*, seeks to complicate a simplistic and often wrong-headed view that "authentic" Theravāda Buddhism *writ large* is inherently antithetical to the accrual of wealth, and that the Thai Dhammakāya tradition is therefore an example of a "capitalistic" or "materialistic" Buddhism that is, in some important ways, at odds with the true essence of Buddhism. One of the principle reasons that this sort of viewpoint is problematic, Scott persuasively argues throughout the book, is that it tends to rest on positing an ahistorical, decontextualized definition of the parameters of "authentic" Buddhism, and then judging complex real world phenomena against this

¹ Arizona State University. Email: jordan.johnson@asu.edu

standard. Thus, while a considerable portion of the book is concerned with laying out a history of the Dhammakāya movement in Thailand and the controversies that afflicted it in the late 1990s, the aim of the book actually concerns the considerably more ambitious project of investigating the nature of the complex relationship between wealth and piety in the Buddhist tradition. Featuring clear, accessible prose and an admirable attention to detail throughout, this is an excellent book.

One of the work's most commendable aspects is the emphasis that Scott places, again and again, on the need to understand various phenomena *in context*. She persuasively argues, for instance, that there is little to be gained from seeking to uncover a single, authoritative Theravāda Buddhist stance on the meaning and significance of the renunciation of the "ordinary" life of the layperson by Buddhist monastics or a universally agreed-upon attitude toward the soteriological implications of wealth accumulation, because no such solitary stance exists. What one finds instead is a plethora of varying approaches that—if they are to be understood at all—must be made sense of within their own specific socio-historical contexts. This is not to say that normative or dominant discourses do not exist with respect to Buddhist approaches to dealing with issues like material wealth, but Scott is careful to point out many of the most common rhetorical positions that Buddhists have taken on the subject of wealth accumulation are, in fact, polemical arguments backed by various agendas, and thus must be understood within that context. This is a very good, well-articulated, and important point that other scholars in the field of Buddhist Studies would be wise to bear in mind.

The "Introduction" to the book serves as an impressively concise, yet nevertheless substantively thorough, description of how Orientalist discourses have assisted in the creation of an account of Buddhism that devalues local forms of Buddhist practice in the service of problematically valorizing textually-based, ostensibly "pristine" forms of Buddhism that allegedly more accurately reflect the actual teachings of

the historical Buddha. While several excellent book-length studies of this subject already exist, Scott's brief summary of some of the more salient points from this field of scholarship would serve as a useful introduction for anyone seeking to gain a quick familiarity with some of the more important themes of the discourse. Typical of her approach of seeking to offer a balanced, nuanced account of each topic she addresses, in the early portions of the book Scott spends considerable space challenging the notion that Buddhism should most accurately be conceived of as the otherworldly-oriented system of rational renunciation that it was portrayed as being by prominent early Western scholars (most notably Max Weber and the many others that he influenced). Her goal here is not to outright dismantle this powerful notion—in fact, she points out that Buddhist thought and practice contains many elements which could reasonably be construed as very much in keeping with such a construction—but rather to highlight the factors that influenced this powerful account's development and rise to prominence. This is done with an eye toward determining how the hegemony (within certain circles) of this “unadulterated Buddhism is essentially otherworldly in orientation” concept has led Western scholars and Asian Buddhist practitioners alike to highlight disjuncture over continuity in identifying Buddhist ideas and practices that do not neatly conform to this ideal as either “new” or even “corrupted.”

In the middle chapters of the book, Scott focuses her attention on the Dhammakāya movement in Thailand more specifically. The material covered here includes a detailed account of the origins of the Dhammakāya Temple, its charismatic leaders, and the manner in which the movement has deployed distinctive methods of meditation and fundraising to transform itself into a popular, wealthy, and influential force within contemporary Thai Buddhism. These sections also include well-developed and illuminating discussions that highlight important issues that have drawn a lot of attention to the Dhammakāya movement (such as the construction of huge *stūpas/chedis* and the distribution of amulets to prominent financial backers) within a context of the history of

Thailand and Theravāda Buddhism more generally. Each successive topic that Scott addresses over the course of her analysis is nicely rounded out by offering a brief account of some of the more relevant scholarly contributions on the subject, a look at what traditional Buddhist canonical or vernacular literature may have to say on the matter, and—if applicable—her own insights on the matter at hand based on her ethnographic fieldwork in Thailand. In keeping with the general approach laid out early in the book, while Scott certainly provides accounts of various judgments of the Dhammakāya Temple's activities (both positive and negative) from insiders and outsiders to the movement alike, she is careful to avoid seeking to either authenticate or disprove the novelty or validity of what some describe as a wealth-friendly form of Buddhist religious piety. Instead, she aims to demonstrate the ways in which the Dhammakāya movement is most fruitfully viewed as representing a fascinating amalgamation of modern and traditional Thai Buddhist elements.

The later chapters of the book offer a closer examination of the various controversies that troubled the Dhammakāya Temple and its contemporary leader, Phra Dhammachayo, in the late 1990s. Not only was this a period in which Scott was living in Thailand doing her fieldwork, but it also coincided with the Asian financial crisis that devastated Thailand's economy. In a fascinating and insightful piece of analysis that relies prominently on Thai newspaper accounts from the time as well as ethnographic data, Scott argues that if the criticism that the Dhammakāya movement's massive construction projects and fund-raising drives cannot be seen as a direct result of the hardships inflicted on the Thai public by the financial crisis, it must at least be viewed as a highly important contributing factor. Once again, Scott's account of the controversy and its eventual resolution is greatly enriched by her concern for accounting for the socio-historical context in which the events that she considers occurred. The final chapter of the book (except for a very brief "Conclusion") returns to the theme of a general consideration of the possible benefits and dangers of commodification

and commercialization in the Buddhist tradition, and contains a useful—if perhaps somewhat cursory—summary of the views of many of the most prominent intellectual Buddhist figures in contemporary Thailand with regard to this issue.

There are precious few substantive criticisms to be offered here. One might argue, however, that despite the fact that the great effort that Scott obviously exerts to provide each topic that she addresses with context stemming from Buddhist literature, history, and socio-cultural studies is one of the great strengths of the book, it occasionally contributes to a certain meandering quality that threatens at times to derail the focus on the issue at hand. Moreover, when Scott occasionally refers to this or that phenomena being a consequence of Thai “modernity” or an instance of “postmodern Thai Buddhism,” one sometimes struggles to nail down precisely what she means in wielding these notoriously slippery terms. However, these are extraordinarily minor critiques, and as has been stated, on balance, this is an outstanding book that—in addition to providing a welcome contribution to the growing corpus of literature on the increasingly influential Dhammakāya movement in Thailand—constitutes an important contribution to literature on the under-studied relationship between wealth and Buddhist piety more generally. By highlighting the fact that that “Buddhism” is not a reified, single entity with a solitary, consistent, and singularly “authentic” attitude toward *any* other phenomenon, but rather is a dynamic, heterogeneous, and historically contingent tradition in a continual state of becoming, Rachelle Scott has provided the Buddhist Studies community with a timely and important reminder.