

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

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

Volume 25, 2018

Theravāda Buddhist Encounters with Modernity

Reviewed by Ananda Abeysekara

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

ananda@vt.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 *Theravāda Buddhist Encounters with Modernity*

Ananda Abeysekara¹

Theravāda Buddhist Encounters with Modernity. Ed. by Juliane Schober and Steven Collins. London: Routledge, 2017, 168 pages, ISBN 978-1138192744 (hardback), U.S. \$138.01.

This volume of essays, edited by an anthropologist of Buddhism, Juliane Schober, and a scholar of Pali and Buddhism, Steven Collins, sets for itself an ambitious goal. In the first chapter they write the following:

The editors and contributors to this volume hope that it will help start a new phase in the consideration of Theravāda (given, indeed, the limitations of this term in doing civilizational history) and modernity, one which goes beyond the kind of simplistic views and terminology as, for instance, “Protestant Buddhism,” that gloss this encounter as a uniform and uni-directional set of developments. *Authors were given entire freedom to use and define both “Theravāda” and “modernity” in whatever way they wished, so there will be no single conclusion or “take-away” point about the volume as a whole. (emphasis added)*

¹ Department of Religion and Culture, Virginia Tech University. Email: ananda@vt.edu.

But the editors also hope that the contributions “will make evident the existence in the Theravāda of what Eisenstadt (2000) called ‘multiple modernities’” in South and Southeast Asia (15–16).

Although I read the essays with some interest, I also found many “sounds and silences” (the phrase Collins uses to note the historical spread of Buddhism) in the unquestioned assumptions about concepts that inform the essays, such as the notion of multiple modernities and even Theravāda itself. Indeed, the lack of theoretical rigor, which is demanded by the subject matter, calls into question many of the conclusions drawn from the empirical data said to usher in the “new phase” in understanding Buddhism and modernity. The empirical material is interpreted through questionable conceptual claims, rendering the representations of that material not always persuasive. In what follows, I engage each chapter closely and raise questions about the authors’ claims and assumptions about concepts like the Pali *imaginaire*, Theravāda, modernity, and multiple modernities. I will argue that the problems entailed in the scholarly use of these concepts could have been avoided with a consideration of the temporality of how concepts are *used* in a “discursive tradition” like Buddhism. The use of concepts in a discursive tradition, made possible by power, carries specific dispositions and sensibilities that produce their “coherence” in distinct genealogies. Thinking about such use can be more productive in understanding how concepts like Theravāda and modernity work within the discursive tradition of Buddhism.

According to Schober and Collins, the goal of the Theravāda Civilizations Project, out of which the volume came into being, is not to create a “dictionary of Theravāda Buddhism” but to “describe what diverse practices in different places and times might have in common, while asserting, from the start, the fact that there are continuities and differences, inflected by local histories, diverse practices and vernacular languages” within the Theravāda civilizations (4). In so doing, Schober and Collins emphasize the idea of the Pali *imaginaire*, the term Collins used in

Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities and which “embodies literatures and histories that are much older than the term Theravāda itself” (6). This is despite Collins’s own conjecture that Pali existed alongside the vernaculars, and “the role of Pali *may* have been very different in different times and places” (18–19; emphasis added). The “Buddhist discourse and practice draw upon the repertoire of the Pali *imaginaire*—about cultural narratives recounted in emic terms,” like *Buddha*, *nibbāna*, *paramparā*, and *sāsana*, to “create cultural meaning in particular social formations and hegemonies” (6).

The idea of the Pali *imaginaire*, especially as Collins defines it, is not without problems. This is in part because the “cultural meaning” that supposedly constitutes it in “particular formations and hegemonies” ultimately becomes the property of a people. In *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, in order to not rely on “Buddhist presuppositions” about nirvana and “describe the wider category of the Buddhist discourse of felicity,” Collins uses (a Geertzian) notion of “the webs of meaning, which a given ideology provides for dealing with life” (101, 110). Thus, Collins explains the essential meaning of soteriology (“the common core” of religion) by quoting Bryan Wilson: “Bryan Wilson [in 1973] uses the idea of salvation in a very broad, sociological sense [to say that] ‘the *common core of all these specific forms of salvation* [like ‘anxiety; illness; inferiority feelings; grief; fear of death; concern for the social order’] is the demand for reassurance” (102; emphasis added).² This cannot

² Even the idea of karma is explained in relation to the universalist ideas of “God’s will, fate, and the like” as described by Anthony Giddens. Collins writes: “I think Giddens (1991: 109–10) is right to suggest that their use is something particularly characteristic of premodernity, where ‘the world is not seen [as it is generally in modernity] as a directionless swirl of events, in which the only ordering agents are natural laws and human beings, but as having intrinsic form which relates individual life to cosmic happenings” (110). Note also that Clifford Geertz, whose universalist definition of religion was criticized by Asad, says similarly that religious moods and motivations are to be found in a “cosmic framework” (see *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, John’s Hopkins University Press, 1993, 36).

help but be an essentialist notion of “cultural meaning” or *culture as meaning*, which has been criticized.³ Yet it is this sense of meaning in terms of “the common core” that informs Collins’s Pali *imaginaire*. After all, as we see below, the relation that Collins constructs between the Pali *imaginaire* and its meaning is founded upon an “unchanging ideology.”⁴ Let me explain.

First, the appeal to this idea of the Pali *imaginaire* is based on a desire to view the history of religious practices by determining and representing what constitute “continuities and differences.” What I find striking is the problem of how, precisely, the scholar determines that the use of a word—for example, *nibbāna*, *paramparā*, or *sāsana*—in given situations constitutes a continuity of *meaning*. What is the precise standard against which Schober and Collins judge continuity or difference, to determine the relation between identity and the iteration of a vocabulary? Even more important, for whom is it an identity or a difference? If only for the scholar, then it is irrelevant to the study of how Buddhists *authoritatively* decide such questions in different moments. What the concern with the continuity of meaning ignores is precisely the question of the use of concepts and their temporalities. (Recall Wittgenstein’s advice that one should not look for meaning but should look for use.) The use of concepts does not add up to some continuity of meaning. So, scholars should abandon efforts to define and represent continuities and differ-

³ For a recent critical evaluation of the anthropological notion of “culture as meaning” as it appears in the works of philosophers like Charles Taylor who theorize secularism in terms of the Christian belief now having a wider cultural meaning and in the social sciences, see Mahmood, Saba, “Can Secularism Be Other-wise?” In *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, edited by Michael Warner et al., Harvard University Press, 2010, pp. 282–299; Scott, David, “Culture in Political Theory,” *Political Theory*, Vol. 31, no. 1, 2003, pp. 92–115.

⁴ Asad carried out a forceful critique of “ideology” as cultural meanings supposed to constitute some essential structure and totality in his seminal essay “Anthropology and the Analysis of Ideology.” *Man*, Vol. 14, no. 4, 1979, pp. 607–627. At issue in the anthropological notion of ideology were precisely the flawed assumptions about how the idea of social structure “expresses the continuity.”

ences in the history of Buddhism in terms of cultural meaning. Instead they should ask: *For whom* does a given Buddhist discourse authorize particular kinds of sensibility and meaning in a situation of rival discourses? The definitions authorized by Buddhist persons, texts, practices are not transhistorically representable as an “unchanging ideology,” as they are part of particular discursive spaces, marked by particular dispositions and sensibilities (for more on the concepts and their temporal sensibilities, see my comments on Emmrich’s and Thompson’s chapters). The way Collins defines the Pali *imaginaire* makes it difficult to ask questions about how *power* authorizes what counts as continuity and difference.

Second, the idea of the Pali *imaginaire* is inextricably linked to Collins’s attempt to delineate “structures and predicaments of the *longue durée*” (Schober and Collins, 21). Note that Collins’s “picture” of “structures and predicaments of the *longue durée*” is “derived mostly not from the specificity of the South or Southeast Asian evidence but from a general picture of premodern, agrarian civilizations” (21). Again, it is not clear how one can understand the shifting uses of concepts and their sensibilities in distinct situations in terms of the *longue durée*. Collins uses the notion of the structures of the *longue durée* in the Pali *imaginaire* in relation to the work of Fernand Braudel. This is how he defines it in *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*: “the coherence and stability of the Pali *imaginaire* in the traditional period, whose cosmology and soteriology was [*sic*] preserved and developed, but never disruptively changed, [remained] over the two thousand years of the traditional period of Southern Asian Buddhism” (76; on Collins’s uncritical use of the concepts “traditional” and “conservative,” see also n.4). He goes on to write, remarkably, “It seems to me that the sub-section of the Southern Asian civilization I am calling the Pali *imaginaire* was in itself for the most part *an unchanging ideology, which was repeatedly adopted by kings in changing circumstances*” (87; emphasis added).⁵ Needless to say, the notion of an “un-

⁵ Now Collins says that Braudel and others “may perhaps overstate the stability and influence of elite ideologies in premodernity” as there were changes such as “gradual” changes in kingdoms, movement of capital cities, and so on, even though “there are

changing ideology” cannot easily account for the genealogy of the use of concepts and their temporal sensibilities in a form of life. Or it is unclear how an unchanging ideology can remain unchanged when framed by “changing circumstances.” Consider the example of Duchamp’s “fountain.” Take it out of the museum, and it becomes just a urinal. That is to say, an unchanging ideology cannot easily account for how different modes of dispositions are made possible by the use of concepts; they are all subsumed within the epiphenomenon of the *longue durée*.

Collins is mistaking coherence for objective “continuity” and “stability.” Coherence is a discursively constructed idea. That is, the appearance of “continuity” is an effect of multiple authors making argu-

differential rates of change in historical time” (85-86). But for Collins “the Pāli *imaginaire* was in itself for the most part an unchanging ideology, which was repeatedly adopted by kings in changing circumstances” (87). Collins suggests that the solution to the question of “how is one to decide between, or at least balance continuity and change in the Southern Asian long term” is to take into account Braudel’s idea that “movement and stability complement each other” (86). Collins understands this notion of “stability” in terms of “a traditionalizing, conservative ideology.” He writes: “Such a traditionalizing, conservative ideology, although never in fact immune to change, often reacts to the fact of newness and change by emphasizing traditional themes ever more firmly.” Astonishingly, for Collins the same traditional and conservative themes are present “even” in modern Buddhism: “This can even occur even in recent times, where iconographic developments in northern Thailand have been seen as an attempt to preserve at least the cultural memory of the traditional Buddhist cosmology” (88). Thus, the very idea of the “traditional” unites premodernity and modernity. All the while, the notions “traditional” and “conservative” are hardly questioned and simply taken to be self-evident (see also my remarks on Berkwitz’s use of these categories in his chapter). This is Collins’s idea of objective “stability.” For a critical assessment of the notions of “movement” and “stability” and how the genealogy of a discursive tradition figures questions of time differently, see Abeysekara, Ānanda, “Religious Studies’ Mishandling of Origin and Change: Time, Tradition, and Form of Life in Buddhism,” *Cultural Critique*, Vol. 98, (Winter), 2018, pp. 22-71. On how the notion “coherence” of a discursive tradition is radically different from Collins’s notion of “stability,” see Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*. On the ways in which the notion of *stabilitas* also worked differently in medieval Christianity, particularly with regard to the practice of heresy, see Asad, Talal, “Medieval Heresy: An Anthropological View,” *Social History*, Vol. 11, no. 3, 1986, pp. 345-362.

ments for the coherence of large swaths of history from the vantage of their specific moments of time. This should not be confused for objective continuity separated from the authors who argue it. But for Collins, the very question of “continuities and differences,” viewed from the standpoint of the definition of the Pali *imaginaire*, is about how we are “to decide between, or at least balance continuity and change in the Southern Asian long term” (ibid., 86; emphasis added). This view again makes it difficult to appreciate the genealogy of a discursive tradition, where it is not a matter of how the scholars “decide between . . . continuity and change” but how power authorizes such distinctions in distinct debates.

Consider, for example, how Schober and Collins compare (and contrast?) their project to the work of Talal Asad: “Talal Asad reminds us that religious ideas and practices are inseparable from the social context in which they emerge” (5). This sweeping statement makes Asad’s argument in *Genealogies of Religion* and other works amount to a rather pedestrian assertion about religion (or some other general topic) made by any number of scholars. Schober and Collins follow up the above statement with an equally universalist statement: “Religion is, after all, a product of human imagination” (5). The authors are not careful in their reading of Asad, who argued precisely against such essentialist characterizations of religion. Asad’s basic argument is that the genealogy of religion (in medieval Christianity and Islam) should be understood as a “discursive tradition” in which the use of distinct ideas, authorized by *power*, brings about not just shifts in the grammar of concepts and their meanings but also distinct sensibilities, passions, and aptitudes, with which one can act in particular ways and *not* in others. The situated and embodied practice of a discursive tradition presupposes a “coherent” form of life. Asad in turn asks about the kinds of modern sensibilities and formations of self and “common” existence that take for granted the questions of tradition as a shared form of life.

Understood this way, unlike the unchanging ideology of the Pali *imaginaire*, a discursive tradition cannot and does not try to “decide be-

tween . . . continuity and change” to uncover a general notion of “cultural meaning” but attends to the notion of temporality in terms of the *use* of concepts in distinct relationships of power. That is, the use of a historical concept—like the Theravāda or the *paramparā* (lineage, or tradition) itself—within a discursive tradition always take place *in the present*; this is rendered necessary by particular modes of argument and dispute competing to authorize particular kinds of intelligibility and persuasion. The coherence of tradition is not always achieved but only aspired to through such debates—for example, about the sacraments, penance, labor, or heresy in medieval Christianity.

Schober and Collins’s inattention to the idea of discursive tradition—already discussed by some scholars in Buddhist studies—leads them to define the ideas of the Theravāda civilizations in rather problematic essentialist terms: “Theravāda civilizations, of course, contain aspirations as well as facts and ideas, of which *the most central is the ideal of the practice of the Middle Way (majjhimā paṭipadā)*” (7; emphasis added). It becomes equally problematic when they argue that “the most central . . . ideal,” which involves *centrally* techniques of meditation” “are also conveyed in the external physical and social habitus of monks indicative of in their mental training; in the studied decorum of [the] folding of monastic robes, in the measured movements of monks and nuns that reveal their meditation training, in the rehearsed chanting of memorized texts,” and so on (7–8; emphasis added). But nowhere are we told how reducing the Theravāda civilizations to a proposition is justified. On that reduction, any Buddhist text, discourse, practice, or person that does not fit the alleged definition could be seen as lacking in “*the most central ideal.*”

It is also unclear at best why these practices, about which one can find debates and arguments, “require complex civilizations to sustain, both practically and ideologically, the privileged status of ascetics” (7–8). After all, we are told that “technologies for disciplining oneself also continuously shape anew . . . the knowledge structures of a civilization” (8).

What is clear is that Schober and Collins, like other contributors, want to underscore the uniqueness of “Buddhist modernity” as it is “inflected in ways that are specific to historical and cultural contexts from which they emerged and thus have imposed limits on our attempts to describe Theravāda modernity in generalizing terms” (8). But to appeal to the notion of inflection is simply to identify multiple modernities in the Theravāda and single out “Buddhist technologies” (9). As I will show below, the subsequent chapters, which seek to formulate arguments along the lines of these assumptions, encounter theoretical setbacks.

In his essay Collins claims to make a “controversial” point by suggesting that modern historians should not try to look for “early Buddhism” based on select Pali texts because

we cannot have any historically certain, or even reliable, knowledge of what . . . [it] was. . . . Any picture of “early” Buddhism, which can only be extracted from texts composed and redacted centuries after that time, will tend inevitably to see actually existing Buddhism as some kind of degeneration from an ideal. (19)

(But recall how Schober and Collins have already defined “the most central . . . ideal” in Buddhism!) Collins continues that the idea of early Buddhism

has been in my view very detrimental to the study of Buddhism, in many ways . . . hence so many books and courses on Buddhism (unlike, I think, other religions) are patterned in terms of “theory” and “practice,” and the guiding principle of inquiry becomes to understand the divergence of the latter from the former. [Instead,] we should . . . start from actually existing Buddhist practice(s) and see the production of theory, and the practices of the self it accompanies, as just one kind of Buddhist practice. (19–21)

This is, of course, a familiar point. David Scott made a more rigorous argument in *Formations of Ritual*, to which Collins inexplicably makes no reference. But Collins's reasoning for his supposedly new inquiry is founded on some questionable assumptions about history, time, and practice. Part of the problem is that Collins, like many of the contributors, does not have a nuanced concept of tradition with which to consider the temporality of the formations of dispositions in a form of life, apart from the mere claim that we should study "actually existing" (whatever that means) Buddhism because we don't have "historically certain . . . knowledge" of early Buddhism. But this notion of "knowledge," vis-à-vis the time of history, creates analytical difficulties that Collins could have anticipated by paying attention to the ways in which the concepts are formed and deployed.

Consider, for example, how Collins chides Richard Gombrich for questioning whether the Buddha himself really, in his heart, believed in gods and spirits, who are often mentioned in the texts. Collins writes as follows:

The idea that a modern scholar can ask what a legendary figure (who we cannot be certain actually existed) thought "in his heart of hearts" is, in my view, a final *reductio ad absurdum* of the entire "early Buddhism" mania. Let us, as historians, remain more sober, less pathological.
(21)

This may seem a sober suggestion. But note that Collins urges the sober historian to approach the question of gods and spirits in Buddhism with the prior *qualification* that the Buddha himself was a "legendary figure . . . who we cannot be certain actually existed." This can only reduce the Buddhists' attitudes of temporality to gods and spirits and the Buddha himself to mere beliefs or presuppositions, which the modern historian's position on history and time does not and cannot rely on.

This temporal framework is not new to Collins. In his work *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, for example, he astonishingly claimed to “construct an account of nirvana which does not rely on Buddhist presuppositions” (101). This is because Collins ruled that “any notion of eternal bliss, whether timeless or endless, Buddhist or Christian, or of any other kind, cannot coherently become an object of imagination articulated in narrative” (133). But even if we set aside the absurdity of writing a 684-page book on a not-really-Buddhist nirvana, Collins’s conception of time, which excludes both Buddhist and Christian senses of time as incoherent, is based entirely on the unquestioned authority of the modern Western philosophical presuppositions of Bernard Williams, according to whose requirements there can be no notion of eternal time “articulated in narrative.”

The “uncritical way in which he [Collins] gives logical and conceptual priority to the world he inhabits,” thereby losing the “Buddhist ‘sense of nirvana,’” led one critic, David Burrell, to write the following:

What is so astonishing is not Williams’s presuppositions but the fact that Collins expects us to accept these criteria without question and without allowing Buddhist texts or practices to offer an alternative way of putting such matters. Or does his stated goal entail that Williams’s presuppositions are acceptable although Buddhist ones are not? . . . So while the account of nirvana may be free of Buddhist presuppositions, it is hardly exempt from modernist reductive accounts of the telos of human existence but displays a form of unconscious ethnocentrism and cultural hegemony quite at variance with the touted sophistication of the work.⁶

Collins could have avoided the problem of prioritizing the presuppositions of modern history and time if he had suggested (as David

⁶ Burrell, David B. “Review of *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pāli Imaginaire*.” *History of Religions*, Vol. 40, no. 3, 2001, pp. 293-295.

Scott taught us) that the Buddhist attitudes of temporality to gods and spirits are those of *dispositions* like fear or fright (*baya*). The learning and cultivating of such dispositions in a form of life, within the habitus of a discursive tradition, render the historian's having to first qualify the unreliability of the historical knowledge about the Buddha or gods by extension immaterial. Where the Buddhists cultivate a disposition like fear (e.g., of malevolent *yakku*, who can make them ill), the question of belief remains inseparable from knowledge. To know or believe in gods, spirits, and *yakku*, to presuppose their existence, is to fear them. Augustine, Martin Heidegger reminded us, captured something of how these dispositions work in the thesis: *initium sapientiae timor Domini* (The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom). Compare this with Ludwig Wittgenstein's remarks: "The belief that fire will burn me is of the same kind as the fear that it will burn me." It would be absurd to think I am saying that history is not important. But the genealogy of a discursive tradition considers the question of history by asking how the sensibilities of temporality, in the present's encounter with the past and the future, are made possible by a form of life.

There are specific temporalities to sensibility, and these are played out in specific life worlds we call concepts. In my view, what is detrimental to Buddhist studies is the neglect of the temporality inherent in the formations of dispositions. These dispositions are found and work within the limits of a tradition and community, and it is these very limits that *enable* the cultivation of the dispositions as distinct abilities. The limits of a coherent tradition cannot be understood in terms of the oxymoronic concept of "groups of inter-related communities" (26), which Collins and his colleagues encourage scholars to investigate in the "interface," "interaction," and "influence" of the Pali literatures with and on the vernaculars (3). A coherent form of life cannot be lived within the interface of interrelated communities.

In her chapter Kate Crosby calls our attention to "Asian technologies," with a discussion of the premodern practice of (Khmer or Thai)

boran meditation. This form of meditation included “a range of goals additional to spiritual attainments,” with “attention to the physical transformation of the body.” Specifically, the meditation included techniques like restoring the imbalances of the *dosa* (“humours”), which she connects to other “areas of scientific or technological endeavor [that] included grammar, traditional chemistry and medicine, specifically pharmaceutical delivery and obstetrics.” She argues that this meditation was “marginalized” by the modern emphasis on mindfulness (*vipassanā*) meditation. In modern *vipassanā* “the body was emphasized as a tool for meditation, not as the subject for transformation” (39–40). Crosby traces these transformations to shifts in the definitions of “science” itself, where *vipassanā* meditation became a kind of “mind-science” (40), aided by the emphasis on select canonical texts like *Mahasatipaṭṭhānasutta* and commentarial texts, marking an “elective affinity . . . between the Western orientalist and indigenous reformers” (37).

One may be sympathetic to Crosby’s deeply humane attempts to contest the “superiority” of Western science and medicine, to acknowledge that Ayurvedic medicine was “a millennia ahead of the Western developments” and that texts like *Abhidhamma* contain an analysis of the relation between mind and body that “still have no parallel in the West” (41–42). Ultimately, however, Crosby’s account makes a humanist gesture toward the non-West, granting that it too had advanced technologies *before* Western modernity. This not only reinscribes a troubling distinction between the West and the non-West, as it can be read back through a (Hegelian or some other) narrative of the West’s progressive *elevation* of itself over the non-West and its technologies.

Despite Crosby’s brief reference to the “close one-to-one teacher-student relationship” required in “traditional practices” like *boran*, her distinction between the West and the East also tends to understand the idea of a Buddhist body itself as representing some subaltern agency, a concept that has received a good deal of criticism. In part, her uncritical reference to Charles Taylor’s “Two Theories of Modernity,” which ad-

vances an idea of multiple modernities as a corrective to an “acultural” history, has prevented Crosby from asking different questions about the body as a set of capabilities, aptitudes, and vulnerabilities that cannot be essentialized to represent some prior normative cultural differences (“modernities”) between the West and the East.⁷

It is also puzzling that her discussion of the genealogy of Western medicine and the body makes no reference to the emerging works on the questions of a “secular” body, in which the distinction between agent and patient operate in the shifting grammar of how pain, illness, suffering, and even pleasure are not just (individually) felt but also articulated as social acts. In general, it seems to me that the humanist nod to the non-West prevents us from thinking in more complex ways about the shifting configurations of the aptitudes and sensibilities that come to define the limits and possibilities of a secular body itself beyond the “psyche-physis” divide that Crosby notes. I think the inquiry into such questions can yield more subtle conceptions of what one may mean by a “religious” body.

The next essay, by John Clifford Holt, is an attempt to explain religious change in the “Buddhist religious culture” of modern Sri Lanka. As desirable as this might be, his attempt is rather disappointing. Holt is interested in “how religion has been affected by processes of modernization” in the context of the civil war between the 1980s and 2009 and the “profound impact of technological change upon the nature and ethos of Buddhist ritual culture,” as well as the ways in which that “process will have a profound impact on how Buddhist religious culture is articulated in the twenty-first century (50). Unfortunately, Holt’s discussion is marred by a multitude of conceptual problems characteristic of his previous writings about religion and politics in Sri Lanka. Holt says that “economic rivalry,” not religion or ethnicity, “needs to be understood as the most aggravating root cause” of the ethnic conflict in the nation.

⁷ For a critique of Taylor’s notion, see Scott, David. *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. Duke University Press, 2004.

This simplistic claim is unlikely to advance any new thinking about the question of religious change because it takes for granted that concepts like religion and ethnicity and even economics are self-evident categories. Holt's claim is like saying that the root cause of anti-immigration attitudes and even racism (which have both become more visible recently) in the United States is really about economics and not race.

To decide either way is to be oblivious to how power authorizes the grammar of these concepts, making possible different modes of persuasion and capacity in distinct situations that cannot be represented in some categorical register. Holt's account is ultimately a moralist one of how religion is "influenced," "exploited," and "transformed" by something external or political. So, Holt views such change in terms of

the commercial exploitation of sacred sites; . . . the presence of hordes of European tourists being hawked unmercifully by tourist touts alters an atmosphere formerly conducive to spiritual exercises, or at least peaceful contemplation. Places at one time regarded as sacred have now being transformed into profitable international tourist attractions and politically significant national landmarks; . . . technological advances in sound amplification have also produced a fundamental change in the religious experience of some Buddhist rituals. For those who have experienced the peace of mind produced from hearing the sonorous chants of Pali *gathas* within *pirit* ceremonies, the distorted amplifications of these chants through microphonic transmission are aurally antithetical to the affect produced by the natural version. (58)

In this story of how something has gone wrong with Buddhist culture, Holt is even struck that "today, in the pages of virtually every issue of every daily newspaper published in Sri Lanka, English or Sinhala alike, it is possible to find an article written about the meaning of Buddhist teachings by some pious layman" (56). Holt does not pause to ask

what it is Buddhists are *doing* when they talk about the meaning of Buddhism in terms of a coherent totality, and why it is not the same thing as scholars defining “the most central . . . ideal” of Buddhist civilizations (7). In a final prescriptive touch, to correct some disconnect between Buddhist monasticism and the modern world, Holt hopes that “sufficiently disillusioned” laity may initiate monastic reforms, as in the past, and that “if better-educated monks are able to relate the teachings and practice of the Buddha to the ever-changing processes and perspectives of the modern world, . . . they might prove to be the kinds of spiritual exemplars that the contemporary world will always need” (60–61).

Anne Hansen tries to rethink “overdetermined” categories like *identity*, *nation*, and *modernity* by suggesting that the attention to the historical “self-understandings” of Buddhists who “have described their ‘affinities and affiliations’ in relational terms” can provide something analytically “important about the collectivities they have created” in early twentieth-century Cambodia. She seeks to do this by “shifting the focus and scale of study from schools and national *sanghas* to individuals in order to scrutinize the kinds of social bonds they create and name, as well as the affective expressions that surround those connections” (63). Hansen looks at a genre of historical writings comprising the biographies of monks and cremation volumes and argues that the texts “reveal person-oriented, smaller-scale views of self-definition and expressions of belonging” (65). For Hansen, these texts are composed by students or relatives of the late monks who provide “intimate knowledge of another person” (69), and they speak to relationships that inspire friendship, generosity, and kindness within “communities of care.” In these accounts, “Buddhist writers did not often employ ‘Theravāda’ or other sectarian terms as collective categories of historical affiliation or self-definition” (68). Following Peter Skilling’s introduction to *How Theravāda is Theravāda?*, as well as the work of Alicia Turner and Anne Blackburn, Hansen claims that examining how Buddhists used terms “besides *Theravāda* or *theravaṃsa* . . . ‘to claim or report monastic inheritance, belonging, and affiliation’ . . . may reveal a new, more differentiated analytic

vocabulary for understanding how Buddhist monks and laypeople have understood themselves” (65).

Is this a convincing argument? What is *analytically* revelatory in the simple claim that Buddhists used different concepts than Theravāda to speak of themselves, their affiliation, and their lineage in different situations? Hansen assumes that the focus on “relationships allow individuals to emerge more vividly in the historical record” without seeing them through the prism of the nation (“national *sanghas*”) (64), but she is not often careful with how she understands her concepts. In the first place, Hansen never questions how a concept like identity or modernity itself can become “overdetermined” unless one wrongly assumes *a priori* that the uses of a concept produce an excess of meanings that exhaust the concept itself. Hansen also takes it for granted that the idea of the nation is readily visible, because “small-scale views of self-definition” of “individuals” remain behind it to be revealed.

Hansen does not recognize that the very idea of self-defining and self-understanding individuals can be appropriated within the genealogy of modern liberalism, which holds, among other things, that (in the words of John Stuart Mill) “the individual is sovereign”; it can also be appropriated within the very idea of the individual, which is criticized by Thompson’s essay in this volume. As for the cremation volumes, the notion that they do not identify a given monk as a Theravāda Buddhist is taken to be ready evidence of the fact that “the label was not very important within Cambodian monastic communities of this period. Rather, they wanted him to be known and remembered as a kindly person who radiated good-heartedness toward others” (75).

The instances of Buddhists remembering past monks in terms other than Theravāda are taken to exemplify a self-evident general relation between subjectivity and self-consciousness: “Buddhist expressions of historical consciousness and self-description have been understood by terms other than Theravāda” (74). Those instances of monastic relationships come to symbolize for her the subjects’ expressions of a transcen-

dental self-consciousness of history. The memory itself becomes the work of a self-conscious subject. Hansen does not notice that this talk about “historical consciousness” has a genealogy that represents an autonomous subject defined by self-constitution (“self-description”), dependent on one’s own conscious being.

As for the absence of the term *Theravāda* in the texts, to take a given statement as an example of an *event*—“the label was not very important in Cambodian monastic communities of this period” because “they wanted him to be known and remembered as a kindly person”—is to miss what R. G. Collingwood called “a logic of question and answer” that should always accompany the study of the past. A statement in a given text cannot be understood as a mere answer without finding out the question for which the statement was provided as a response. Or, in Quentin Skinner’s words, an answer to a question is an attempt to solve a problem, as part of a “move in an argument” in a particular moment. The cremation volumes as particular statements about monks constitute answers to a set of specific questions, which cannot be seen as some general evidence of why the label *Theravāda* was not considered important in the period. The *Theravāda*’s importance in the situation cannot be ascertained that way because the question was different.

It is ironic that Hansen does not think about these kinds of analytical questions, because she herself alludes to the “‘question and answer’ (*prasnā*) primers” about religion that appeared in mid-twentieth-century Cambodia (67). But the primers are treated as mere objects of historical evidence because they are said to mention only the “key words ‘religion’ [*sāsana*] and Buddhism [*buddhsāsana*] but make no reference to *Theravāda*”—a term, she says, that was mentioned in passing only in the 1960s.

Hansen’s logic that the term was not “commonly used” in the past (64) fails to take into account the rather obvious relationship between language and speech genre. For example, every president of the United States has been Christian, yet no inauguration speech, to my knowledge, has mentioned Jesus. Does that mean that audiences did not

view the religious references to God as somehow “Christian”? Even in the nineteenth amendment of the Sri Lankan constitution, added in 2015, only the words “Buddhism” and “*Buddha sāsana*” (translated as *buddhāgama* and *buddha sāsana* in the Sinhala version)—not “Theravāda”—are used to describe the “foremost place” (*pramukhasthānaya*) the state gives to Buddhism.

But as with the U.S. inauguration speeches, we should be careful not to confuse the conventions of political speech genres with propositions of doctrinal affiliation. One can, of course, find other instances where references to “sectarian” affiliation are rendered inappropriate in terms of the form of religious speech genre. For example, at Buddhist funerals we no more find statements about monks’ and lay Buddhists’ affiliation to Theravāda than we would find explicit statements at a Christian funeral regarding “what a great *Presbyterian* she was.” Thus, when it comes to terminology as an index of identity, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. The question about Theravāda depends on a competency that requires a relationship that understands it as potent.

Hansen’s injudicious assumptions about what is “commonly used” and what constitutes a community create other problems. Indeed, in the absence of “sectarian terms” like *Theravāda*, Hansen’s idea of “communities of care” (generated by relationships fostering acts of generosity, kindness, and care) makes *sectarianism* the default state of Theravāda (in modern times). The idea of communities of care becomes synonymous with what was “commonly used” outside the modern nation-state. What was more common (i.e., kindness) was more natural in Buddhism at one period in history.

This assumption can be seen in Hansen’s understanding of emotions to be “not just culturally constructed but also culturally aestheticized” in the communities of care (64). This restricted modern view of emotions as “aestheticized” expressions reduces them to some pre-natal domain of common life. This view of emotions also disregards the

literature on the history of the heterogeneous uses of what we call emotions, which include and exclude different and competing conceptions of affective dispositions even within the collective lives of modernity—with distinctions between emotions and passions and even passions and interests and emotion and sympathy.⁸ It seems to me that the assumptions in Hansen’s essay and others’ writings force us to think more carefully about the temporality of *common* and *community* and the form of life they presuppose in their complex genealogies and to ask what implications they have for the study of Buddhism. I refer to the genealogies of the modern nation-state’s appeals to the idea of common and community and the premodern notions like a *koinos bios* (“common life”), which the Greeks did not possess (according to Giorgio Agamben in *The Highest Poverty*) but which was invented as a “form of life” by medieval Christianity, where *norm* and *life* enter a zone of indistinction utterly foreign to modernity.

Some of these assumptions about Theravāda and modernity in the previous chapters can be seen in Christoph Emmrich’s essay that aims to explore, among others, the “limits of the scope of the project of deconstructing the term “Theravāda’ in Nepal.” Emmrich describes Theravāda in Nepal in an array of confusing ways: as recent, “barely three generations old,” disjointed, “tentatively used for self-designation,” precarious, “still emergent,” antihegemonic, impoverishing. *Deconstruction*, a term that Jacques Derrida himself once said is an “ugly and difficult word,” does not help to clarify things in Emmrich’s questionable assertions about the telos of history and its momentum:

What makes deconstructing Nepalese Theravāda so difficult is less its own subversive momentum than its crea-

⁸ I am here thinking of works like the following: Hirschman, Albert O., *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph*, Princeton University Press, 1971; James, Susan, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, 2000; Festa, Lynn, “Sentimental Visions of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Studies,” *Literature Compass*, Vol. 6, no. 1, 2009, pp. 23-55; Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, particularly chapters two and four.

tive, constructive, while still dissenting impetus. *This latter is yet too unfinished, too undecided, too tentative, too experimental, in some of its more progressive aims, too much in need of other forms or support and critique. . . . If deconstruction of Theravāda in Nepal may achieve anything, it would be to discover that what has been constant in its Nepalese history is both its attempt at establishment as well as its failure to finally do so. . . . Deconstruction . . . may [help us] understand and find yet unarticulated reasons for why a movement may, for a considerable period, remain suspended in that liminal state between inception and establishment. (86; emphasis added)*

I do not wish to suggest conformity to a Derridian model, but the entire question “under which conditions, how, and why should one deconstruct” Theravāda takes enormous liberty with the temporality of concepts in the genealogy of a tradition (84–86).

The problem lies in Emmrich’s teleological understanding of the supposedly “too unfinished” history of modern Theravāda as the history of a “crossover” of ideas, persons, and texts, etc., which he says is “still” in the making (98n28). Noting the beginning of Theravāda in the 1920s, Emmrich’s history alludes to the following “developments”: the idea of Nepal as the birthplace of the Buddha and restoring it to its past heritage; the Newar cultural nationalism “fed by transnational religious and political flows” and the Newar demand for a role in the Nepalese state; the arrival of two Theravāda monks in Nepal and four women “from high-caste families” becoming ten-precept mothers, according to the Burmese tradition in the 1930s; a “wave of repression” and the reemergence of the exiled Theravāda monastics; a Sri Lankan monk’s bringing a relic and a sapling of a Bodhi tree to Nepal in the 1940s (79–80); the prohibition on recruitment from the Hindu community and the Theravādins’ seeking of support outside the Kathmandu Valley in the 1950s; the Theravāda women’s involvement in rural service projects fos-

tering links with “the international community of nuns, Western scholars, and activists promoting social justice and the political empowerment of girl children and women of all ages”; the predominantly private patronage of Theravādins from Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, and other diaspora communities; the Pali-Newar Tipiṭaka translation project and “a modernism that is distinctly ethnic and located within a larger linguistic-nationalist project” marked by the use of Newar instead of NePali; the popularity of the hagiographical genre such as a widely read translation of a biography of a Nepalese Buddhist by a Burmese author; the construction of libraries for the study of Pali, Sri Lankan, Southeast Asian, and modernist Buddhism in the 1990s; the educational centers outside Kathmandu offering meditation classes “attended increasingly also by Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, or Smārta, members of the middle class”; the more recent monastic efforts to change “the nation-state from a Hindu monarchy to a secular republic” (79–83).

Emmrich’s problematic notions of crossover, interface, transnational flow, and transactional inspiration treat the history of Theravāda in Nepal as a set of disjointed and precarious events not yet coherent. It is an account of how modern Theravāda’s history consists of multiple influences, as it “still—very much bears the stamp of and institutional debt toward the diverse countries of its transactional inspiration” (89; emphasis added). Emmrich’s notion of a Nepalese Theravāda that bears the “stamp” of its “debt” is cast in a rather troubling creditor-debtor relationship. As such, Emmrich’s moral subject of Theravāda, laden with debts to multiple creditors, becomes a subject of guilt. Emmrich’s view of the concept Theravāda is then one of destiny awaiting a final judgment on its “debt toward . . . diverse countries.”

The sense of scholarly eschaton is palpable in his repetition of the word still as he writes about what Nepalese Theravāda “still” is and what it may “yet become:”

Nepalese Theravāda is—*still*—very young, having entered the country only in its modernist form. . . . Literary prac-

tices involving canon, exegesis, grammar training, or examination do not seem to be—yet—of any greater significance. Its centers of training, spiritual authorities, and, most of all, sources of funding—still—lie largely outside the national borders. It—still—plays no or hardly any role in contributing to the formation of a Nepalese national cultural identity, though it has played . . . a major role in developing ethnic identities among Tharus and Magars in opposition to a national ideology and power groups associated with Hinduism. It enjoys no—or, if at all, a very weak—endorsement by the political elites. It struggles to define its position vis-à-vis the dominant religion, Hinduism, and other forms of Buddhism. (89; emphases added)

Here Emmrich does not pause to ask how his view itself might be implicated in the history of the modern nation-state seeking to authorize competing legal and political distinctions of “religions.” But, astonishingly, Emmrich then throws caution to the wind and writes, “In spite of all this, it is exactly in the still small, nevertheless growing significance of Theravāda in these very fields that *the most exciting developments are ongoing and are to be expected in the future*” (89; emphasis added).

Emmrich’s desire for future “exciting developments,” which the historian can expect to catalog into a body of comprehensive knowledge about the Nepalese Theravāda, could have been set aside had Emmrich heeded Friedrich Nietzsche’s memorable argument that concepts that have histories can have no definition. Theravāda in Nepal is such a concept, with a genealogy whose use has already presupposed coherence for the Buddhists who use it, shaped by particular forms of sensibility. The use of a concept already presupposes coherence in a relationship of power in which one is *affected* by that use. Indeed, the very contestations—that is, the repression, exile, and reemergence of Theravāda in the history of Nepal—speak to the affects of such use by power.

The same goes for the so-called crossover of texts like the popular Burmese novel. When one reads or hears a text and is affected by it, when the effect is an ability to do something, one is not necessarily thinking of that effect as a crossover of some external influence. Does a modern professor of Buddhism who reads a text from another place and time think of the reading as a “crossover” and “transactional inspiration”? It can only register as a crossover if the professor thinks of that effect as an experience of influence, but this is precisely what does *not* happen. It would register as such, Wittgenstein would say, only if we were to tell ourselves that we were being influenced. Emmrich seems oblivious to the problem that determining what constitutes influence has a complicated history within the colonial, missionary, and liberal politics of moral subjectivity and agency. Even the missionary practices sought to avoid the possibility of subjecting the converts to any external influence to make them authentic subjects of conversion.⁹

The genealogy of Theravāda’s uses and meanings in the instances that Emmrich provides already has coherence in those very instances and does not need to wait for some future after an experimental phase for its intelligibility. The genealogy of Theravāda must be understood as constituting a discursive tradition made possible by the very contestations of the concept that give it coherence. The problem with Emmrich’s teleological account is that much of the time we rarely get a sense of how the Nepalese themselves talk about Theravāda. Even one promising instance—in which Emmrich is obligated to recognize the existence of debate about the word *ādhunik*, referring to the “modern” in Nepal—is undercut by his reverting to theoretically indefensible claims: “what modernity *actually means* in the Nepalese context at certain points in time and for certain individuals and groups may be much less clear” (95;

⁹ See, for example, Viswanath, Rupa, *The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion, and the Social in Modern India*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. Also, for a discussion of the notion of “influence” in the study of Buddhism and Modernity, see Abeysekara, Ānanda, “Protestant Buddhism and ‘Influence’: The Temporality of a Concept,” *Qui Parle*, forthcoming.

emphasis added). Emmrich cautions against academics' "strong" definitions, but he fails to see that what "certain individuals and groups" mean by modernity in Nepal is *clear to them* when they use the term "at certain points in time." Emmrich similarly errs in claiming that, "Theravāda in Nepal, with its *ambiguous multiple colonial heritage*, makes questions such as whether Nepalese modernity is either a European or an Asian phenomenon" (91; emphasis added).

The point eludes Emmrich that the very *multiplicity* of views about a concept that engender debate about it already presupposes coherence. But based on an arbitrary assumption about the incoherent multiplicity that supposedly makes up the Nepalese Theravāda, Emmrich suggests that the "there are good reasons for getting rid of the idea of a unified Theravāda block" and that we "go beyond the potentially impoverishing function of the Theravāda and its concomitant and unproductive binary of unity and diversity" (89–90). This is like saying that Wittgenstein wants us to stop using the word *game* because it has no consistent meaning. Wittgenstein's point is exactly the opposite. He wants us to see that just because a word has a range of usages with no single unifying thread does *not* thereby impoverish the meaning of the word. The meaning lies in the use, not in the transcendent category of the analyst.

But Emmrich insists otherwise: "Theravāda as a term used in and for Buddhism in Nepal is *likely* to have done very different things at different times. At times what it used to do may be done very well without the term itself" (96–97; emphasis added). The very different uses of the concept that give it intelligibility in those uses is then assumed to impoverish or overdetermine the concept itself, thereby placing the burden of responsibility on not just scholars but also Buddhists themselves to evaluate if the "most exciting developments . . . to be expected in the future" really have to be Theravāda. Ultimately, an essay that claims to tell us "what Theravāda does" arbitrarily decides that Buddhists themselves can do without the term *Theravāda*.

The chapter by Stephen Berkwitz is interested in how Buddhists—in particular, two monks, Gangodawila Soma (1948–2003) and Kiribathgoda Gnānānanda (1961–)—talk about the questions of authentic Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Berkwitz’s presentation of the monks’ views is preceded by a brief mention of the history of Sri Lankan Buddhism, which he says is “founded upon a conservative ethos and a historicist orientation that celebrates its long and well-documented history in the island.” Sri Lankan Buddhists, we are told, “respond in novel ways to the pressures and opportunities of the modern world,” such as when the monks bemoan the usurpation of their role in national politics with the advent of colonial and postcolonial governance—which, ironically, recognized Buddhism as “foremost” among other religions (104–105).

But “despite the distinctive features of Sri Lankan Theravāda Buddhism in modernity, we should not conclude that it is simply the product of a clear rupture with the past.” This is partly because Theravāda “was associated with ideas of authenticity and originality” in the past, and “there are signs that Buddhist groups in ancient Sri Lanka . . . had internal debates over the authenticity of their respective disciplinary practices and textual interpretations” (106–107).

Despite these debates, for Berkwitz “the interpretation of history by Buddhists in Sri Lanka is conditioned by the country’s collection of historical writings (*vaṃsas*) and archaeological sites that jointly speak to a past shaped by Buddhist kings and monks for a largely Buddhist public” (104). As “Buddhist practices and ideas in Sri Lanka are exposed to rival” forms of tradition and “knowledge [that] is commonly derived from multiple sources and authorities, not all of which are local or traditional,” Berkwitz writes, “Sri Lankan Buddhists are often inclined to authenticate their religion with reference to a Theravāda *historical consciousness*” (106; emphasis added). But the modern notion of “Theravāda Buddhism,” he says, is “a product of the convergence between scholarly and nationalist discourses” (107).

So how does Berkwitz's story of the monks Soma and Gnānānanda fit into this schematic understanding of history? The two monks are, Berkwitz says, "more salient" examples of "multiple, competing assertions on what constitutes Buddhism and the truth." They are more salient because they are part of modernity, in which "local traditions become disembedded and revised in accordance with global forms of thought and practice." Berkwitz's narrative boils down to how the monks, who have "acquired large numbers of followers inside Sri Lanka and across the world among the Sinhala diaspora community, . . . promote a rhetoric of authenticity" (109). Although Soma's rhetoric of pure Buddhism was combined with a critique of the immorality of politicians, Gnānānanda advances a supposedly "apolitical" message about how Buddhists need to return to the original teachings of the Buddha. Both monks lament the corruption of the views and conduct of Buddhists caused by the so-called external influences—Hindu and Mahāyāna—on the Buddha's teachings. In trying to delimit falsehood and truth, both monks are making authoritative claims about what counts as Buddhism in the modern world.

Except for Berkwitz's interesting summary of the monks' statements, it is not clear what we are to make of the general monastic statements about Buddhism. It will not be difficult to find any number of Sinhala monks in Sri Lanka who talk precisely in the terms that *resemble* (Berkwitz's word) the "rhetoric of authenticity" articulated by Soma and Gnānānanda. It is, of course, important to recognize how definitions of Buddhism produce authoritative discourses, but that fact in itself does not make it clear why those discourses seek to be *authoritative*. Nor do Berkwitz's generic characterizations of the monks' views as controversial, political, or apolitical help us understand the conditions that make possible such authoritative discourses. What needs to be emphasized is that authoritative definitions of Buddhism that *include* and *exclude* distinct ideas, dispositions, and sensibilities already presuppose distinct relations of power. Who can spell out what should be part of Buddhism, for whom and for what purposes, is rendered possible by power relations.

Berkwitz's narrative does not provide any sense of how power authorizes the kinds of rhetoric in which the monks engage. Rather, the monks' views are pressed into the service of Berkwitz's Buddhist history.

Thus, Berkwitz states the following:

What one discovers by examining the discourse of modern Theravāda monks like Soma and Gnānānanda is that a high premium is often placed on teaching and practicing the true form of Buddhism. This rhetoric of authenticity has a much older history in premodern accounts of events that affirm the special role that Sri Lankan Buddhists have played in preserving the Dhamma after the Buddha passed away into parinirvāṇa. (113)

Hence, Berkwitz, not unlike Hansen, thinks of this kind of history in terms of "Theravāda historical consciousness." This clearly runs counter to his own passing claim that the monastic views are "contestable." But at the end, Berkwitz simply sees the monks' views as mere "responses to modernity" (114).

The fact that the Buddhists are *responding* to or critiquing modernity has to be understood as their making claims about what is modern, just as the Buddhist views of Theravāda authenticity are themselves claims in distinct moments of time that cannot be explained as "historical consciousness." This is what gets occluded in the lack of attention to the modes of power that inform Soma and Gnānānanda's rhetoric of Buddhism. As Berkwitz knows, the ideas of power that animate the Sri Lankan monastic community also involve questions about differences in monks' affiliation, *nikāyas* (fraternities), caste, status of education, and so forth. In the case of Gnānānanda, for instance, one wishes that Berkwitz had inquired into the politics of the monk's new lineage, Mahamevnāwa, and what fraternity or chapter he may have broken away from to do so. How do the questions of caste and social status figure into the new monastic lineage that counts even university graduates among its hundred

of ordained monks? How is the education confined to their own monasteries (which they call *asapuvvas*) viewed to be different from the *pirivena* education of monks? What are the sources of funding for the network of more than fifty monasteries in Sri Lanka and abroad?

As I have learned, some Buddhists see Gnānānanda as an impostor trying to “destroy” (*vināśa karaṇḍa*) Buddhism because of his birth as a Christian; others criticize his teachings as efforts to “turn upside down” (*anitpāttaṭa haravaṇḍa*), “change as he thinks” (*hitanavidiyāṭa venas karaṇḍa*), or “insult” (*nigraha karaṇḍa*) the religion. Gnānānanda’s style of preaching based on a simple form of Sinhala is also seen by some monks as a “modern distortion” (*nūtana vikurti; kanapiṭa gahalā*) of Buddhism. Some monks have expressed suspicion and disapproval of Gnānānanda’s controversial claim that during his visit to India he could recall his former life as a monk ordained under the Buddha’s closest disciple, Ananda. Gnānānanda’s changing the Buddha’s image into a figure with a thinner body and blue eyes, among others, has also received criticism. What is interesting is not these sorts of criticisms themselves, but how they presuppose a discursive space of the new definitions in relation to questions about the coherence of tradition in Buddhism. That tradition is not reducible to Berkwitz’s idea of the history of Buddhism “founded on a conservative ethos and a historicist orientation.” To view the history of Buddhism through the binary conservative versus radical is to commit to a general understanding of Buddhism that forecloses the consideration of power that authorizes the discursive space of competing disputes aspiring to a coherent form of life.

Ashley Thompson’s chapter is largely a critique of David Wyatt’s representations of the work of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Thai temple mural painter Thit Buaphan. Thompson argues that the “acultural” account of Wyatt’s *Reading Thai Murals* supposes a problematic relation between sameness and difference because it reads the painter’s work through the category of the artist to define his genius. Throughout his work Wyatt defines the artist as a “true artist,” synony-

mous with the notion of an “individual artist,” and thus seeks (according to Thompson) to “restore the artist’s rightful place in the historical record.” In one instance, Wyatt uses the fragment of a temple mural painting to speculate that it represents the self-portrait of Thit Buaphan (121–122). Wyatt acknowledges but diminishes “the collective nature of Thai temple mural painting as he ignores “the fact that Thai historical records have *not* maintained the artist’s identity” and “the fact that Thit Buaphan did *not* sign his name to the oeuvre” (124–125).

Referring to the European Renaissance conceptions of self-consciousness and individual identity, Thompson says that the idea of a self-portrait “represents the *work* of art as distinct from that of artistry in the former’s critical consciousness of representation itself. . . . In (the making of) the self-portrait, the artist sees himself as the other” (126). Although Thompson is not against writing into history the figures written out of it, she finds Wyatt’s resorting to the technique “observation of nature” to identify “naturalistic individuals” as misguided.

According to Thompson, Wyatt sees Thit Buaphan’s paintings as interrupting the “traditional insistence on sameness at the expense of difference.” For example, contrasted with the prior depictions of warfare in an image in a Buddhist temple, Wyatt’s interpretation sees the image as representing “individual suffering” as the “artist is ‘embedded with the troops’” (132). In Wyatt’s view, the previous works of art only present individuals as *dramatis personae* and not as true “actors.” Wyatt’s reading, according to Thompson, is an instance of how “the depiction of the moment of death in warfare in the modernist paradigm is concomitant with the epiphany of the singularity of life at that moment lost.”

That depiction runs counter to the place of the murals in Buddhist temples, “yet this image is, after all, on a Buddhist temple wall,” Thompson notes, continuing:

The modern Northern Thai Buddhist temple is a place of life, of course, a place where painted narratives of Bud-

dha's lives mingle with others of the daily lives of real characters. The modern Northern Thai Buddhist temple is also a site dedicated to cultivating detachment from individuality; where the sight of death is routinely wielded to trigger insight not into the singularity of life, but, to the contrary, into the very lack of an enduring self the "individual" is only falsely perceived to embody. (134)

Thompson's critique of Wyatt's reduction of difference to the notion of individual(s) in a self-portrait is interesting, but her attempt to distinguish the self-portrait from the supposed "embodied experience of selves and collectivities irrevocably grounded in the ideal of the non-self" in Buddhism does raise some questions (135). Her objection to Wyatt's essentialist reading is situated squarely within the volume's general point about Buddhist modernity. She writes as follows:

There is a place for essentialism within 'Theravāda Buddhism'—a foundational one at that. But it has little place in gauging artistic sensibilities at work in late nineteenth-century Northern Thai Buddhist temple murals. The Murals in question, I will argue, may show signs of encounter with Western modernity, but they do not evince a *wholesale adoption* thereof. (121; emphasis added)

As I have argued elsewhere, this is an increasingly orthodox claim in the scholarship that colonial modernity did not affect Buddhism wholly, or completely. The claim sets such a broad standard that one can almost always say that colonialism or some other power did not "wholly" affect the native subjectivity—i.e., the consciousness. (Recall John and Jean Comaroff's argument that in the Evangelical encounter in Africa, "the very nature of the consciousness itself was the object of struggle.")¹⁰

¹⁰ For a critique of the Comaroffs' ideas of consciousness and subjectivity, see Asad, Talal, "Comments on Conversion" in *Conversion to Modernities*, edited by Peter van der Veer, Routledge, 1996, 263-273.

Thompson, who emphasizes “the ideal of non-self” in Buddhism with a comparative remark about the “Indian concepts of (non)self,” turns the former into a priori denotation of an essential difference between the West and Buddhism. She also makes nonself the criterion by which we might identify something as Buddhist. It is on the ground of this ideal that she determines why the murals in the modern Thai Buddhist temple are not examples of a “wholesale adoption” of Western modernity. This notion of the supposed ideal detracts Thompson from asking precisely about the distinct kinds of places and times in which the idea of nonself becomes available for discussion in Buddhist life (128). Even in the Buddhist canon, one cannot find the idea of nonself to constitute some transhistorical essence of Buddhism.

Joseph Walser has demonstrated that the idea of nonself in Buddhism, which is portrayed by current scholarship to be the “other” of Brahmanism or Hinduism in general, is found in less than ten percent of (more than five thousand) *suttas* in the Pali Buddhist canon, and it is not presented as a contrast to the Brahmanical doctrine of *ātman* in any of the canonical discourses. Of course, Walser grants that historically there were Buddhists who did present the doctrine of selflessness in this way, but these presentations of the doctrine should be seen as contingent responses to specific demands and not taken as simple, free-floating propositions of the form “Buddhism teaches selflessness.”¹¹ So it will not do to present selflessness in the way Thompson does as an ideal that constitutes a simple index of Buddhism. To then present the ideal of nonself as something to be contrasted to individuality as an equally awkward index of Western culture presupposes a seamless continuation of the knowledge of the concept nonself and the temporality of the affect of its use. To do so, one would have to presuppose the very “consciousness of representation” defining the modern idea of the individual that Thompson herself criticizes.

¹¹ Walser, Joseph, “When Did Buddhism Become Anti-Brahmanical? The Case of the Missing Soul,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 86, no. 1, 2108, pp. 94-124.

To suppose that kind of continuation between the knowledge of a concept like nonself and the *ability* to use it in a situation, Wittgenstein would remind us, is like saying that making a move in chess based on the prior knowledge of the rules of the game merely involves moving chess pieces on a board. In thinking about the use of concepts and the temporality of their effects, one may recall a question from Wittgenstein: “‘Since yesterday I have understood this word.’ ‘Uninterruptedly, though?’” Wittgenstein wants us to think about how this statement differs from the following sort of statement: “He has been in pain uninterruptedly since yesterday”? In thinking about that question of temporality, what needs to be developed is Thompson’s own interesting suggestion about how Wyatt’s method of observing, for example, the “crying women images” is “significantly different” from the Buddhist “technique of evoking emotion through repetition.” Wyatt does not attend to such a technique of repetition because he says that “in examining these figures carefully, . . . I could actually see the tears rolling down their cheeks” even though “the photographs . . . do not show these” (129–130). The notion of repetition stands in stark contrast to Thompson’s own assumptions about the nonself ideal. Where the repetition of a practice, such as the use of a concept, takes place in a living relationship, the knowledge of an ideal does not produce timeless affects, because a concept is not a symbol one represents to oneself. Repetition already supposes new situations, new predicaments, and new questions. So, repetition is not merely repeating the *same* idea. This goes for a concept like nonself or any other concept in Buddhism.

Thompson herself might agree that one does not randomly think about such concepts (like suffering and even the death depicted in the Thai temple murals). One can, of course, be trained to meditate on and even be conscious of ideas, but that training is a cultivated ability that produces distinct, not universal, affects. That is, when one is affected by the use of a concept, one *does* something with it; one hears, reads, asks a question, becomes receptive to an explanation, or argues about the concept. That use—call it repetition—already involves a living relationship

of power that does not guarantee the same affects and sensibilities, because the very *ability* to use the concept is made possible by different situations of discussion and debate within the discursive tradition.

To be more precise: When we talk about the sensibilities in the use of a concept, we are not talking about the mere *understanding* of a concept. Reflecting on the relation between the temporality and the acquisition of sensibilities and affective aptitudes can help us see that Thompson's own idea of "evoking emotions through repetition" does not justify the essentialist claim about the "embodied experience of selves and collectivities irrevocably grounded in the ideal of the non-self" (135).

The title of Thomas Borchert's essay, "Conscripts' of Chinese Modernity?", is an allusion to David Scott's book *Conscripts of Modernity*. But Borchert misses the basic point of Scott's book. Scott takes the idea of conscripts of modernity from Talal Asad to question the very notion of multiple modernities and the heroism of modern subjectivity and creative agency in the story of the making and collapse of the Haitian revolution. In contrast, Borchert tells us that the Theravāda monks of the Sip-songpannā community who were "forced to act within the constraints of the categories and institutions" of "Chinese colonialism" were not "losers." They are not losers because the practice of Theravāda Buddhism as a "unique" kind of Buddhism in the Chinese state creates "opportunities" and the "ability to access resources" for their education (147).

As we will see below, my argument is not a quibble over vocabulary but a critique of something that runs much deeper. In fact, in Borchert's hands, the idea of ability corresponds to the agency of the monks who conduct their religious affairs in the face of the transformations of their past regional practices brought about by the "modernizing projects of the Chinese state." Hence, they are treated as "opportunities."

The Dai-lue Buddhists of Sip-songpannā, a region that borders southwest Myanmar and Laos, are an ethnolinguistic group with a dia-

lect similar to the dialect in northern Thailand. Borchert tells us that before it was “deeded to China in the late nineteenth century when the French and the British carved up the region” and was fully incorporated into China in the mid 1950s, the region was a small kingdom that maintained links with other communities of Southeast Asia. The Dai-lue are Chinese citizens, but given their status as a “modern minority,” they are recognized as “backward” (*luohou*), which affords them particular benefits like being able have two children. “Until quite recently, most Dai-lue men were ordained and learned what it meant to be a proper Dai-lue adult and community member inside the monastery before marrying” (140).

During the Cultural Revolution, the Dai-lue were not allowed to practice their religion until the reform era (the early 1980s). Following the importation of the word “religion” (*zongjiao*) from Japan and the classification and management of “normal religions,” coupled with the centralization of the monastic order in Sipsongpannā, today Dai-lue Theravāda Buddhism remains visible to the state within the category of Chinese Buddhism. Only very recently did the monks and lay Buddhists use the word *Theravāda* to describe themselves. With the “reconstruction of their ‘traditional’ forms of education” that depended on “transnational resources from Thailand and the Shan states,” and supported by wealthy Chinese Buddhists, today Dai-lue Theravāda monks also study Mahāyāna Buddhism at educational institutions in other parts of China and use the opportunities to pursue studies in Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Singapore as well, says Borchert (144–145).

However, he adds that

they do not have the ability cross borders at will, . . . [and] they have had to learn a language that many of them did not grow up speaking, their homeland is being developed willy-nilly by colonizers (though it is important to note that this is my term, not theirs to describe Chinese control of the region), and they have to tread carefully lest they

raise the baleful eye of the Chinese security apparatus. Theirs is by no means the worst hand possible, but it is not strong. They would probably not be listed among the “winners” of modernity. Yet it would be a mistake to see them as the losers. (146)

Although one might find comfort in the idea that these Buddhists were not “losers”—it is hard to shake the image here of the beleaguered Buddhist monks being relegated to smoking cigarettes and riding their skateboards behind the “dumpster of modernity”—it is not clear what Borchert’s rhetoric of winning and losing really gains for us. Indeed, contrary to Scott’s idea of “conscripts of modernity,” which makes it difficult to understand modern subjectivity in the language of “vindicationism,” Borchert’s reduction of colonial subjectivity to the rhetoric of winners and losers inscribes a notion of agency that attributes a modern sense of individual *responsibility* to the Buddhists.

A quick Google search would have shown that liberal discourses about responsibility and hard work have appropriated the rhetoric of winners and losers as one of self-empowerment—promoting the idea that even the survivors of natural disasters like the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami could become active subjects of change in terms of a refrain like: “Winners make things happen and losers merely wait for things to happen.” Even in the midst of the most catastrophic circumstances, human subjects cannot be “losers” because they can always exercise their *abilities* and responsibilities. According to this logic of winners and losers, which is also reminiscent of the anthropological views of subjects who can make their own history “in adjusting consciously to these forces [like capitalism or colonialism] and giving that adjustment a meaning,” Asad remarked (in *Genealogies of Religion*) that “even the inmates of a concentration camp are able, in this sense, to live by their own cultural logic. But one may be forgiven for doubting that they are *therefore* ‘making their own history’” (4).

One must also ask how Borchert can justifiably categorize something called Chinese modernity, given the history he himself provides of not only the recent transnational projects of the Dai-lue monastic education but also the history of the French and the British carving up the region and the eventual ceding of it to China, the introduction of the word for religion from Japan, and the emergence of Buddhism itself as a world religion, in which the “translocal conceptions of Buddhism exist in tandem and in tension with local and state forms” (138).

In describing how “several aspects” of the Dai-lue educational projects are “indicative of the conditions of Buddhist modernity in general,” Borchert writes that:

it implies notions of secularity with religion being a matter of choice, at least in part, a world that assumes the nation-state as the primary form of political organization and that ‘Buddhism’ is a conceptually unified object that can be identified as a world religion. (144)

Borchert’s assertion that the forms of Buddhism that emerged in Sipsongpannā were “the result of Chinese colonialism, and not British colonialism” does not describe a reality but rather presupposes a truth on the grounds of a proposition that merely declares it to be such (138). At best, that declaration is a preference that simply suits that of the volume for “alternative modernities.”

My point is that having to separate the tangle of local and translocal forms—the categories that the scholar brings to the study—of Buddhism and decide what constitutes the result of Chinese modernity overlooks the conceptual intelligibility that the use of the term in specific instances requires that the notion of multiple modernities be rendered oxymoronic. Of course, like any concept, the history of modernity is constituted by conflicting debates in various places, but it is not justified to call them multiple modernities unless one assumes wrongly, as I have already suggested, that the multiple uses of a concept impoverish or

overdetermine the concept itself. It is this flawed logic that the authors bring to bear on the very concept of Theravāda. Think of the word *liberalism*, which too has as a complex historical tradition. It is worth quoting in full Asad's point about it. In the tradition of liberalism, he says,

Locke is not Constant and Constant is not Mill and Mill is not Rawls, that the history of liberalism in North America is not the same as that in Europe—or, for that matter, in parts of the global South where it can be said to have a substantial purchase. Liberalism isn't located simply in classical texts, and of course it jostles with other traditions in the West. In its early stages, liberal politics was engaged in challenging hegemonic power, it was full of passion. Now, more often than not, it is the ally of global power: cool, rational, and imperturbable. As a discursive space, liberalism provides its advocates with a common political and moral language in which to identify problems and to dispute them. Such ideas as individual autonomy, freedom of (economic, political, social) exchange, limitation of state power, rule of law, national self-determination, and religious toleration belong to that space, not least when their meanings are debated. Its theorists seek to present liberalism as consistent and unified, but it is precisely the contradictions and ambiguities in the language of liberalism that make the public debates among self-styled liberals and with their “illiberal” opponents possible.¹²

The discursive space of modernity requires precisely a “common moral and political language” that renders intelligible what modernity is or is not. One cannot debate its ambiguities and contradictions without

¹² Asad, Talal, “Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism,” in *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, edited by Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood, University of California Press, 2009, p. 25.

such a common moral political language. The idea of multiple modernities supposes separate spaces with their own private languages, outside the discursive space of modernity. This, of course, is the scholar's view, and not reflective of those of the Buddhists, which can be found only in those specific instances of the debate about what is called modernity.

In my reading of the chapters, I have discussed a number of conceptual problems in the claims about concepts like Theravāda, the Pali *imaginaire*, community, modernity, multiple modernities, and so on. I have found each of these conceptualizations to be lacking rigorous attention to the temporality of the use of concepts in distinct genealogies. A more nuanced and accurate intervention would involve attention to how power authorizes arguments and debates about the past and the present and their relation to the future. While I found the material interesting, I have found problematic the representations of them through the claims about how Buddhists used terms other than Theravāda to talk about *sāsana* and community in the past or that the relation between the contemporary Theravāda societies and modernity should be viewed in terms of multiples modernities because of their local histories and vernacular languages. I have argued that such claims ignore the ways in which the shifting *use* of concepts and their sensibilities produce particular kinds of coherent intelligibility in a form of life. The temporality of coherence, sought through debates about what constitute Buddhism in particular situations, cannot be grasped in terms of the scholars' efforts to "decide between, or at least balance continuity and change." More often than not these continuities and differences lie more with the academic observer than with the Buddhists themselves. I have suggested that the temporality of coherence can be better appreciated by thinking about how the use of concepts *works* within a discursive tradition like Buddhism.