

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A HISTORY OF BUDDHIST RITUAL

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Todd Lewis



AQ: woof of daily life?

Buddhism is not a separate compartment of belief and practice, but a system of symbols, psychological attitudes, and ritual behavior forming the warp against which the woof of daily life is woven.

Manning Nash (1965: 104)

Practices of the monks are so various and have increased so much that all of them cannot be recorded.

Faxian, Chinese pilgrim in India, 400 CE (Beal 1970: 1, xxx)

INTRODUCTION

Many early scholars held that “true Buddhists” follow a rational, atheistic belief system, and that they focus almost exclusively on meditation, solely intent on nirvana realization; and that “popular” practices – especially rituals – represent a deformation of the Dharma (Buddha’s teaching), an unfortunate concession to the masses. It is now clear that this is an absurd projection in the Western historical imagination, an assessment uninformed by textual evidence and anthropological studies.

Since householder traditions and non-virtuosi practices have not been central concerns in most research since the inception of modern Buddhist studies (Schopen 1991a), many texts concerned with nonelite belief and practices written in canonical languages, and especially ritual manuals, still remain largely unexplored. So, too, have anthropologists working in vernacular languages neglected the indigenous guidebooks that are in the hands of modern Buddhist monks and priests, the true “working texts” of living Buddhism. As a result, a proper documentary history of Buddhist ritual traditions, either in antiquity or today, simply cannot satisfactorily be written as of yet. To compose an overview of Buddhist ritual, one must rely on what little ritual literature has been translated, accounts by a few Chinese pilgrims who visited India from the fifth to seventh centuries, and then on the accounts about modern Buddhists in missionary and anthropological publications. These plus what has been published in local vernaculars and, more recently, posted on temple websites are the only sources.

There is, in fact, a vast inventory of Buddhist rituals known from the beginning of the tradition onward, as the quotation from the intrepid Faxian 法顯 (337–ca. 422 CE) reports

about India only 900 years after the death of the Buddha. And then what of the ritual traditions that were added to “the innumerable” practices over the past 1,600 years until now? For now, this chapter can only attempt a rough overview of the major areas of ritual observance, especially those founded in the past that continue until the present.

At the outset, it is necessary to articulate a social historian’s model of Buddhism in which to locate its ritual history. This view of religion in practice must recognize: (1) the fact that monastics were a small minority in every known Buddhist society; (2) the reality that there is even a smaller number of individuals, past or present, whose adherence to the faith was primarily intellectual or philosophical; and that (3) throughout its history, the material support for this tradition was primarily in the hands of householders, whose contributions were essential for the existence of the tradition. It is the householder majority, then, for whom ritual activity, broadly defined, was their primary medium of “being Buddhist.” Attending to these “facts on the ground” reveals that studying ritual involves examining the fundamental exchanges that sustained Buddhism as a living tradition. For it was these central, recurring, and satisfying human actions that could – and did – elicit the loyalty of householders for the past 2500 years.

THE TEXTUAL RATIONALES FOR BUDDHIST RITUAL

There is no shortage of early textual discourses that present both injunctions and rationales for “popular devotional activities.” These are rituals that have from the beginning of the tradition made positive, meritorious contributions to those who follow the path and that serve to continually renew the foundations – material and metaphorical – of every Buddhist civilization. Thus, a set of key authoritative textual sources requires attention at the outset of this essay.

The Long Discourses (*Dīgha Nikāya*), part of the Basket of Discourses (*Sutta Piṭaka*) of the Pāli Canon, speaks of the devout Buddhist’s duty “to help others in increasing faith, moral virtues, knowledge, charity” (N. Dutt 1945: 169); the Pāli “Discourse to Sigālovāda” (*Sigālovāda Sutta*) specifically enjoins every householder to “maintain ... the traditions of family and lineage; make himself worthy of his heritage; and make offerings to the spirits of the departed” (de Bary 1972: 43). The third and most sustained text on Buddhist ritual is not one with which most students are familiar such as “the four noble truths”; to grasp Buddhist tradition with historical and sociological imagination, it is essential to be familiar with the text specifying “the four conditions” and the “four good deeds.” These are found in the *Connected Discourses* (*Aṅguttara Nikāya*) of the Pāli Canon (IV, VII, 61ff.).

This text is not concerned with the 5 percent of the population who were in the monastic elite; in this teaching, Śākyamuni addresses the major concerns of the Buddhist householder’s life, as he instructs the “good Buddhist” to seek the four conditions:

There are these four conditions which are desirable, dear, delightful, hard to win in the world. Which four? ...

- (1) Wealth being gotten by lawful means ...
- (2) Good reputations among kinsmen and teachers
- (3) Long life and attaining a great age ...

- (4) When the body breaks up, on the other side of death may I attain happy birth, the heaven world! ...

(Woodward 1992, II: 74, with numbers added)

How should this moral and Buddhist householder who has earned wealth then invest his time and money? Buddha next enjoins him to perform the four good deeds:

- (1) [He] makes himself happy and cheerful; ... he makes his mother and father, his children and wife, his servants and workmen, his friends and comrades cheerful and happy. ...
- (2) He makes himself secure against all possible misfortunes, such as by fire, water, the king, a robber, an ill-disposed person ... so he takes steps for his defense and makes himself secure ...
- (3) He makes the five-fold offering (*bali*): to relatives, to guests, to hungry ghosts, to the king, and to the gods (*devatā*) ...
- (4) He offers gifts to all such recluses and brahmins ... who are bent on kindness and forbearance, who tame the one self, calm the one self ... and for such gifts obtains the highest result, resulting in happiness [here] and [merit] leading to heaven.

(*ibid.*, with numbers added: 75–76)

This passage ends with praise of one whose wealth has been used fittingly in these ways, who has rightly “seized the opportunity,” and who has “turned wealth to merit.”

The provisions and actions articulated in this canonical text are, in fact, remarkably congruent with modern anthropological accounts of Buddhist societies across Asia: householders still want such basic human blessings and seek similar spiritual goals. Then as now, rebirth in heaven is a “good Buddhist” aspiration; then as now, the Dharma taught by the Buddha speaks to the householder’s situation: being a “good Buddhist” means fostering family ties, allows for “energetic striving” after economic success, justifies rightful seeking after worldly happiness and security, and underlines the virtue of being a donor and patron.

Contrary to those who hold idealized reductive views of what the Buddha actually taught, here the Great Teacher specifically applauds the religious virtues of faith and the legitimate aspiration of Buddhists seeking heaven; and this Pāli sermon is a decisive proof text that the Buddha not only believes in divinities: here he clearly *requires* householders to “do the good deed” of worshiping hungry ghosts and local gods. (On monastics being required to do the same, see below under “Mobile Image Rituals: Buddha Image Processions and Ratha Yātrās.”) It was this pragmatic conception of householders following the Dharma, however nuanced in every local community, that shaped the successful domestication of Buddhism from Sri Lanka to the Himalayas, from Central Asia to Japan, over the past 2,500 years.

Thus, to focus solely on elite texts designated to guide the rare meditation master or philosopher is to miss the center of Buddhism in society. Instead, it is important to recognize three interlocking tracks of legitimate Buddhist religious activity, and the place of ritual in the Buddhist world:

Pragmatic wellbeing	Moral nirvana	Cultivation seeking
ritual/merit-making	merit-making	meditation
95% of population		5% of population

The first two ideals are sought through the work of ritual. Thus, a sound working definition of a “good Buddhist” is simple: one who takes the three refuges (reliance on the Buddha, Dharma, and Monastic Community) and who conducts the necessary ritual practices. And implicit in the performance of ritual is the systematic, lifelong garnering of merit, to which we now turn.

PUNYA AND DĀNA: THE FUNDAMENTAL BUDDHIST EXCHANGE

The early and useful formulation for analyzing the tradition’s own definition of a Buddhist community is called “the graded teaching” (*anupūrvīkathā*). It implies that the Buddha’s Dharma assumed the inherent differences between individuals and that these are due to the fact that every person bears a different heritage of former acts, or karma. Since there is this natural scope of diversity in any Buddhist society, the compassionate spiritual guide must try to match the level of teaching with the disciple’s capacity to understand and take action; this serves to foster progress in the long-term, multi-lifetime ultimate goal of nirvana-seeking. Hence, the *anupūrvīkathā* comprises a natural hierarchy of legitimate, progressive Buddhist practices, a kind of “syllabus” for systematically advancing in spiritual attainment. What does this say about what it is that “good Buddhists” should do? The progressive advancements on the path in the *anupūrvīkathā* go forward as follows:

- 1 *Dāna/punya* (gift giving/merit[-making])
- 2 *Śīla/svārga* (morality/heaven)
- 3 Evils of *pāpa/kāma* (immoral acts/pleasure seeking)
- 4 Value of renunciation
- 5 Four Noble Truths.

(Lamotte 1988: 77)

It is obvious again how gift giving/merit-making is the foundation for Buddhist practice; it is also clear that the performance of ritual is a necessary and expected practice for “good Buddhists.”

As merit-making has provided the chief orientation point and goal in the Buddhist layman’s worldview and ethos, gift-giving has always been the starting practice for accumulating merit, the lifelong measure and accumulation of spiritual advancement. Merit-making has been the universal, integrating transaction in Buddhist societies, regardless of whatever was the monastic intellectual elite’s orientation toward various Theravāda, Mahāyāna, or Vajrayāna doctrinal formulations or spiritual disciplines.

Again, the wish for merit leading to better rebirth, even in heaven, was – and in practice, still is – the most popular and pan-Buddhist aspiration; indeed, a very often repeated responsibility spoken by the Buddha to monastics was for them “to show the laity the way to heaven.” Merit accumulation is needed to reach heaven. It is true that Buddhist doctrine holds that heaven is a temporary state and that the faith’s ultimate goal of *nirvāṇa* entails the individual’s final, eternal cessation of karma. But the Buddha taught that in the long path through cyclic existence (*samsāra*), aspiration for heavenly rebirth, even if it is temporary like all other rebirths, had its legitimate place (and was infinitely better than rebirth in the multitude of hells).

Finally, the full sequence of the *anupūrvīkathā* together conveys why moral living (that avoids demerit and earns merit) and merit rituals (that can garner merit in large quantities)

figure so prominently in Buddhist life: it affects the natural law of karma acting on individual destiny that has both next-life effects as well as practical, this-world consequences (Obeyesekere 1968; Holt 2004). Here, it should be noted that even in the earliest texts, many Buddhists became monks or nuns for the great merit earned by doing so and because being “in the robes” opens many opportunities to earn merit, as is evident from the *anupūrvīkathā* list above. The same motivation holds true among monks and nuns entering the Saṃgha (monastic community) today.

The final canonical text to be cited provides perspective on Buddhist ritual; it has the Buddha explain exactly how to earn merit in the course of one’s life for the purpose of spiritual advancement. Again given his propensity for lists, he enunciated the five cardinal precepts (*śikṣādāni*), and it is pertinent for all disciples, monastic and laity, on the path to nirvana.

- 1 *Śraddhā* (faith)
- 2 *Śīla* (moral observances)
- 3 *Tyāga* (generosity)
- 4 *Śrūti* (listening)
- 5 *Prajñā* (insight)

(Lamotte 1988: 70)

Such texts were doubtless reference points as the autonomous *saṃghas* spread across South Asia (and beyond), and they came to establish the features of Buddhism in practice in varying societies. Lacking a central institution that defined orthopraxy, the Buddhist communities designed and shaped a great variety of practices, customs, and possibilities. New ritual practices also come to be adopted up to the present, indicating the vitality of this need for merit, and the vitality of Buddhist communities in responding to their lived worlds.

How did Buddhists come to live according to these five cardinal precepts as the faith grew to be a regional, then global, world religion? By venerating images (fulfilling *śikṣādāni* 1); taking precepts and fasting (*śikṣādāni* 2); organizing compassionate actions and charitable institutions (*śikṣādāni* 2, 3); arranging public recitations of the texts (*śikṣādāni* 4); and encouraging meditation, the final stage and essential practice that cultivates the inner spiritual discernment of reality, *prajñā* (*śikṣādāni* 5).

But the most universal and typical expression of lay Buddhist faith and merit seeking has been through the rituals of gift-giving (*śikṣādāni* 3): feeding, clothing, and housing the Saṃgha; building shrines, funding charities, etc. Gift-giving’s “investment” is described and celebrated in the *Birth Stories* (*Jātaka*) and *Legends* (*Avadāna*) literature as well as in the Mahāyāna discourses (*sūtra*). One twist in reckoning the merit earned is that the greater the spiritual standing of the recipient, the greater the karma reward to the donor. Generosity to all beings is applauded, although the best “merit return” accrues to gifts made to the buddhas, bodhisattvas (“buddhas-to-be”), and the Saṃgha. Mahāyāna texts agree in the primacy of gift-giving to the individual as an expression of compassion (*karuṇā*) and for its value as a renunciatory practice for the donor as well (Dayal 1932: 165–93). We now turn to the multitude of ways that Buddhists sought to fulfill these canonical ideals in their daily lives.

MAJOR BUDDHIST RITUAL TRADITIONS

It was for regularizing needed gift-giving presentations that monks and laity developed standard ritual procedures (*pūjā*) and calendrical norms, many that were already part of a

common Indic tradition based on the lunar calendar and the region's patterns of etiquette, purity, and pollution. Buddhist rituals evolved that complemented meditation and study; employing medical terms, specific rituals were seen as compassionate actions that could achieve specific beneficial results for suffering humanity. For the Mahāyāna devotee, *pūjā* was quintessentially an expression of skillful means (*upāya*), a disciplined act that aids the spiritual destiny of all beings, self and others.

THE MONTHLY CALENDAR FOR RITUALS AND THE INDIC *UPOSATHA*

Buddhist ritual life has always followed the phases of the lunar month. Based upon the lunar calendar, the two extreme phases of the moon's appearance were deemed observance (*uposatha*) days; the key *uposatha* day each month is the full moon (the twelve hours on both sides of the moon's peak fullness) that has always been singularly auspicious. The Buddhist year then is punctuated by twelve major holy days; in Sri Lanka, for example, every full moon in sequence is regarded as commemorating a key historical event in the life of the Buddha or in Sri Lankan Buddhist history.

First, *uposatha* days imposed a strict requirement on the monastic community, which had to join together for its own, private ritual recitations on these days, and then serve the needs of the community with sermons and consultation, all as specified in the monastic mode, or Vinaya. (Discussed in the next section.)

Emphasizing the fundamental interdependence between Saṃgha and lay community, householders were encouraged to visit their local monasteries (*vihāra*) on every *uposatha* day to make offerings to the Saṃgha and to the different sacred objects found there. (These are also enumerated below.)

On these days, devout lay folk (*upāsaka*, *upāsikā*) can take the opportunity to observe eight of the ten monastic rules while residing continuously on the monastery grounds. The usual lay precepts of no killing, lying, stealing, intoxicants are followed; the precept of no sexual misconduct is changed to abstinence; and three additional rules are followed, namely, not to participate in secular entertainments, not to wear perfumes, garlands, or fancy clothes, and finally not to eat after noon. Accordingly, these devout Buddhists wear plain white clothes and reside on monastery grounds continuously for twenty-four hours. The laity's frequent observance of fasting after midday (until the next morning) led to their being commonly referred to as "fasting days." Thus, the lunar fortnight rhythm has always dominated the Buddhist festival year.

The Buddhist calendar also regularly schedules the eighth lunar day (*aṣṭamī*) of each fortnight for rituals. In the classical period, *aṣṭamī* is also called a "fasting day" and this seems to have been the common lunar day chosen for to hold ritual and festival events outside the monasteries. For example, the bright *aṣṭamī* day of the month of Jyeṣṭhā is mentioned by Chinese pilgrim Faxian (in India and Lanka from 399–414 CE) as the day when a great Buddhist chariot festival was celebrated in Pāṭaliputra (Legge 1965: 79; N. Dutt 1977: 39). Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang 玄奘 (596–664; in India from 629 to 645), to cite another example, also records that there were three months each year – Phālguna, Āṣāḍha, Kārtika – when Buddhists observed special rituals and "long fasts" (Beal 1970: 1:180).

RITUALS OF BUDDHIST MONASTICISM

The Vinaya, the texts of monastic rules, regulations, and history, were at the center of the communal life in institutions created by the Buddha. The specific rules of residence in each monastery were copied and consulted regularly across Buddhist Asia. Communal life was based upon the proper ritual demeanors ordering the lunar-cycle-based monastic calendar; from the ordination hall to the latrine, from the wearing of robes to the hierarchy among monks, from settling disputes to expelling rule breakers, the monks and nuns were expected to live a disciplined life that was regularly punctuated by prescribed rituals.

Each *saṃgha* in ancient India had its own autonomy, and in addition to the general guidelines of life in the Vinayas, there were also local monastic ordinances (*kriyākāra*) to which those monks wishing to live in any specific establishment also had to conform (Schopen 2002: 362).

It is also clear that monks were told by the Buddha in the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya to do other rituals. One that was performed daily in most monasteries across Asia involved each monk setting aside a morsel of food for the *pretas*, hungry ghosts; these were typically collected by a serving monk, then deposited on a stone set close to the monastery boundary. Commonly found in the archaeological records of South Asia, such stones are a ubiquitous feature of Nepalese and East Asian monasteries up until today. Other ritual requirements recently brought to light were those that instructed monastics to recite verses for the monastery's tutelary guardian deity and another for a traveling monk to make a set recitation for the deity of any well or water source used in his travels (Schopen 2002: 380). Proper funerals for departed monks and nuns were a special concern for the early Saṃgha (e.g. Schopen 1992).

RITUALS OF ORDINATION: NOVICE AND FULL MONASTIC VOWS

Elaborate rituals were developed by the community around the monastic initiations for novices (Pāli *pabbajjā*) and full monks (*upasampadā*). In Theravāda contexts until today, families of the candidate arrange for elaborate fun-filled processions to the monastery, in imitation of Siddhārtha's life as a prince and his departure from householder life. Music, dancing, and merriment prevail. When the monastery boundary precincts are reached, the candidate gives away whatever wealth he has brought along, showering the audience with presents, from coins to sweets. Then with his closest family only, he enters the silent ordination hall of the monastery where, after making donations to the Saṃgha, he must go through an elaborate series of ritual steps, the first of which is having his head shaved (as he holds a tuft of his own hair as a reminder of impermanence). Before an assembly of at least ten ordained monks, he must then certify his eligibility for admission, be assigned a preceptor, don his monastic robe, and take possession of his begging bowl, after which he repeats each of the ten monastic precepts, as prompted by his preceptor. Only men of 20 years of age can be given the full ordination.

In East Asian traditions, the ordination rituals are similar, with local additions such as having smoldering incense applied to the ordinands' skin. Scars form, implying the ordained monk's or nun's lifelong commitment to the Saṃgha. The regional Mahāyāna interpretation of the Vinaya has added other elements such as having candidates take bodhisattva vows (to help others reach emancipation) and adopt a purely vegetarian diet.

The lifelong expectation is not found in modern Theravāda traditions, where the custom of adolescent, premarital short-term monasticism evolved in Theravādin Burma (Spiro 1971), Thailand (Tambiah 1970), and modern Mahāyāna Nepal (Gellner 1992). In these places, “entering the robes” for most young men is more about merit-making for one’s parents than genuine trial periods of monastic life.

FOR MONASTICS ONLY: *PRĀTIMOKṢA* RITUALS

Each fortnight on the new and full moon days, Indian Saṃgha members were required to gather together at one time, without householders present, to recite the vows of “individual liberation” (*prātimokṣa*). This is a terse summary of the categories of monastic discipline regulations, and after each section’s rules are repeated, the chanting pauses for each monastic present to affirm – by keeping silence – that all are in conformity with every major and minor rule. This recitation is held in the morning, after any infractions committed over the previous fortnight have been confessed (*ālocanā*) in private to the monk’s superior beforehand. Thus, for the Saṃgha *Uposatha* became the regular ritual occasions to review, correct, and certify the proper standards of monastery discipline (Prebish 1975; Wijayaratna 1987).

MONASTIC RAIN RETREAT: *VARṢĀVĀSA*

In keeping with the monthly lunar cycle, the most prominent yearly Indian Buddhist monastic observance was the monsoon rain retreat called *varṣāvāsa* (Pāli: *vassa* or *vassāvāsa* [S. Dutt 1962: 54]). Dating from pre-Buddhist ascetics and adopted by Śākyamuni for his Saṃgha, the rain retreat practice, as required by the Monastic Discipline, was first marked by a ritual of commencement. For the next three months, it curtailed monks’ mobility outside the monastery and encouraged meditation and study for its three-month duration (Wijayaratna 1990).

One ritual requirement incumbent on monks at the start of the rain retreat found in the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya (the “working text” for most Buddhist monks in northern India and, later, Tibet) was that monks must worship the Buddha as well as the monastery’s local protective deity (Schopen 2002).

Among the largest donation events of the year, *varṣāvāsa* ritual ceremonies mark the beginning, formal ending (*pavāraṇā*), and new robe donations (*kāṭhina*) to monks who gather together for the retreat. The *pavāraṇā* ceremony is much like the biweekly *uposatha* for the monastic community; but for the lay community their emphasis is on a grander scale of merit-making, as the texts specify that gift-giving on this day is more fruitful than at other times (N. Dutt 1945: 249). *Kāṭhina*, the post-rain retreat presentation of new robes by the laity, likewise garners special karmic rewards, a tradition that endures across Theravāda Southeast Asia (Tambiah 1970: 154–60).

For historical reasons not yet understood, in East Asian Buddhist monasteries these Indian precedents were not followed. At most Chinese monasteries (where there was also no monsoon), there were no *uposatha* days. The only liturgical change on the first and fifteenth of the month was the addition of certain items to morning and evening ritual devotions. The summer monsoon retreat was also generally ignored, although some monks were aware of it from their Vinaya study. Some individuals might choose to observe it as a

special spiritual season, but in most institutions life continued as usual without the Indic practices. At many Chinese monasteries during these same summer months, however, it was customary to arrange for this summer period to be a time for study and for the abbot or other masters to expound the *sūtras*.

BUDDHIST RITUAL CHANTING

Buddhist chanting rituals link spoken words with simple deeds. The *paritta* texts of the Pāli Canon are one early manifestation (Skilling 1992). Monks chant one of eight recommended treatises while their senior monk pours water, symbolizing the blessing's dispersal. A thread linked to an image or water vessels is held by all in attendance; and at the conclusion of the chanting – so that can take a few minutes or days, or even weeks – the thread is rewound into a ball, then the monks tie pieces broken off to encircle the necks or wrists of those attending. The water that has now been infused with the Buddha's words is also used to lustrate individuals and sites, imparting protection and auspiciousness.

The earliest Mahāyāna ritual in this same mode is an elaboration of the bodhisattva's ritual service, emphasizing mastery of word chains known for their spiritual powers: *mantras* and (if longer) *dhāraṇīs*. These holy words, also part of the Dharma revealed by the Buddha, are found in the *raḥṣā* literature (Skilling 1992). Their being given to the Saṃgha to alleviate human suffering is conveyed in the stories that form part of these works. Mantras can be spoken to protect the speaker, the Saṃgha, new shrines, as well as entire settlements and even countries. Resort to these formulas was one of the divisions in early Buddhist medicine (Zysk 1991: 66). This ritual chanting, which eventually included entire texts, was thought to further the foundations of spiritual practice; it was also done to generate good karma and radiant auspiciousness for towns and domiciles, especially at key moments of life cycle passage or crisis.

Ritual service came to dominate Mahāyāna Buddhism as it developed. This is clear in early East Asian Buddhist history, where cumulative *dhāraṇī* traditions were instrumental in the successful missionization of China when emperors, doubtful about Buddhism's place there, were converted as a result of the elaborate rituals performed by Buddhist monks to protect the realm, as well as the imperial family's well-being (Strickmann 1990).

Myriad other Buddhist householder rituals evolved to organize the regular performance of such *mantra* recitations for households and communities across Asia. The mere presence of one of the most popular text of recitations, the *Pañcarakṣā* (Lewis 2000) was believed to provide protection for houses.

BUDDHIST FESTIVAL TRADITIONS

We now turn to the specific yearly observances that defined early Buddhism in practice. Like other great world religions, Buddhist cultures ordered and shaped time through regular monthly and yearly festivals. Some of these orchestrated the reliving of classical Buddhist events *in illo tempore* (Eliade 1957: 70). Celebrations of the Buddha's birth, awakening, and final liberation (*parinirvāṇa*) are universal, although their performance differs with regard to dates (Swearer 1995); other more regional sacred events likewise mark the year (Gombrich 1988), as different communities were free to assign their own definitions for these "auspicious days." These include Śākyamuni's ascent/descent from Tuṣita heaven to preach to his mother, or events marking a key point in the lives of bodhisattvas such as

Vessantara (Cone and Gombrich 1977), the Mahāyāna figure Avalokiteśvara, or the death anniversary of a local saint (Tambiah 1984; Strong 1992). More festivals will be cited in the sections below, as related to the timing of the rituals described.

Primary Constructions: Relic Stūpas

The Great Teacher’s instructions on how to handle his body, cremation, and the resulting remains established the central tradition of Buddhist ritual. The Pāli *Discourse of the Great Final Liberation (Mahāparinibbāna Sutta)* describes the first rituals devised to venerate Śākyamuni’s cremation relics,

The Mallas of Kushinara also brought water scented with all kinds of perfumes ... surrounded the bones of the Exalted One in their council hall with a lattice work of spears, and with a rampart of bows ... there for seven days they paid honor, and reverence, and respect, and homage to them with dance, and song, and music, and with garlands and perfumes.

(T. Rhys-Davids 1969: 130–31)

Until the present day, Buddhist relics and stūpas are venerated just so, amidst drumming and musical accompaniment.

Since then, the depositing of relics in circular mounds surmounted by a royal umbrella made the stūpa (or *caitya*) central focal point and the singular landmark denoting the tradition’s physical presence. The Chinese pilgrim journals confirm what has been found in the archaeological record, that from the beginning stūpa construction and worship were carried out at the key venues in his religious career. The tradition eventually recognized a standard “Eight Great *Caityas*” for pilgrimage and veneration.

Worship at these monuments, as large as a hillock or as small as a backyard shrine, became the chief focus of Buddhist ritual activity linking veneration of the Buddha’s “sacred traces” to an individual’s attention to managing karma destiny and mundane well-being. The Chinese pilgrim Yijing 義淨 (635–713; in South Asia 673–687) noted the rich variety of forms these shrines had assumed a thousand years after the founder’s death, with each made according to specific ritual tradition:

The priests and laymen in India make *caityas* or images with earth, or impress the Buddha’s image on silk or paper, and worship it with offerings wherever they go. Sometimes they build *stūpas* of the Buddha by making a pile and surrounding it with bricks... . This is the reason why the *sūtras* praise in parables the merit of making images or *caityas* as unspeakable ... as limitless as the seven seas, and good rewards will last as long as the coming four births.

(Takakasu 1982: 150–51)

The archaeological record shows that stūpas were frequently built in the center of monastery courtyards, often by monks themselves (Schopen 1989). Yijing’s journal also notes that performance of stūpa ritual was at the center of the Saṃgha’s communal life:

In India priests perform the worship of a *caitya* and ordinary service late in the afternoon or at the evening twilight. All the assembled priests come out of the gate of their

monastery and walk three times around a *stūpa*, offering incense and flowers. They all kneel down, and one of them who sings well begins to chant hymns describing the virtues of the Great Teacher ... [and] in succession returns to the place in the monastery where they usually assemble.

(Takakasu 1982: 152)

One final form of *stūpa* ritualism in ancient India had a votive-cum-mortuary aspect (Schopen 1987): Certain prominent Buddhists, including monastics (Schopen 1989), arranged to have their own cremation ashes deposited in small votive *caityas*, often placed together and close to a larger Buddha relic *stūpa* (Schopen 1991a, 1991b, 1991c, 1991d, 1992). These structures seem to have been deployed as a means for perpetual merit generation for the deceased. In East Asia, monastic cemeteries carry on this tradition.

Despite the many understandings Buddhists of every level of sophistication regarding *stūpas*, in practice all could nonetheless converge to mark events associated with the buddhas or saints. *Stūpas* thus became the natural sites for some of the other Buddhist festivals of remembrance and ritual veneration.

“Best of Constructions”: Rituals of Monastery Building

A monastery (*vihāra*) can be of humble construction or built to imperial or aristocratic standards. Each must have a place for the monks to sleep and a site where those in residence gather for required rituals, and this must be marked ritually with boundary stones (*sīmā*). Only here can a legal ordination or *uposatha* confirmation that adheres to Vinaya ritual be held. A ceremony is essential for a patron to legally donate the land and its buildings, fittings, etc. to the *sangha*: holding a brick, the donor presents it to a representative of the *sangha* and pours water over it, ritually declaring his transferring ownership.

Some texts made quite specific recommendations to the laity regarding the best ritual donations yielding the highest merit return, and a monastery built according to these stipulations produces maximum reward. The Sanskrit text *Objects for Merit-Making* (*Puṇyakriyāvastu*), for example, arranges the following hierarchy of donations, tying securely the wish for individual good karma accounting with donations that establish the *Samgha*'s material existence:

- 1 Donating land to the *Samgha*;
- 2 Building a monastery on it;
- 3 Furnishing it;
- 4 Allocating revenue for it;
- 5 Assisting strangers;
- 6 Tending the sick; and
- 7 In cold weather or famine, giving food to the *Samgha*.

(Lamotte 1988: 72)

All Buddhist lineages applaud the great merit accruing to those who build monasteries. Modern studies show that this view of monastery building exists right up to the present (Tambiah 1970: 147ff; Welch 1967). In antiquity as now, there are extensive ritual procedures for establishing the site and then erecting the various structures that can constitute the “monastery” such as dormitories, image halls, ordination halls, meditation

halls, refectories, stūpas, bodhi trees, and storage halls. Monks were appointed superintendents for this work (Schopen 2002). Here as in most other areas of Buddhist life after 600 CE, the Mahāyāna tradition developed much more detailed ritual procedures (Skorupski 2002; Tanemura 2004; von Rospatt 2010). Since not much is known about the actual monasteries that were built and the “working” ritual texts that actually guided the monk-superintendents, little more can definitively be said. What is certain is that for most monasteries, there was a yearly festival to celebrate its anniversary of dedication, and these “birthdays” were times when donor families did refurbish and clean it.

BUDDHA IMAGES: CONSTRUCTION AND VENERATION

The making of buddha shrines and images entailed rituals of proper construction, consecration, and upkeep (Lancaster 1974). Yijing describes the role of images in Buddhist practice, especially for those who are not advanced in their spiritual standing:

There is no more reverent worship than that of the Three Jewels, and there is no higher road to perfect understanding than meditation on the Four Noble Truths. But the meaning of the Truths is so profound that it is a matter beyond the comprehension of vulgar minds, while the ablution of the Holy Image is practicable to all. Though the Great Teacher has entered Nirvana, yet his image exists, and we should worship it with zeal as though in his very presence. Those who constantly offer incense and flowers to it are enabled to purify their thoughts, and also those who perpetually bathe his image are enabled to overcome their sins ... receive rewards, and those who advise others to perform it are doing good to themselves as well as to others.

(Takakasu 1982: 147)

Such were the sentiments that by 700 CE legitimated the elaboration of Indian Buddhist ritual and festival traditions, and this historical observation is matched by texts such as the Mahāyāna *Entry into Bodhisattva Deeds (Bodhicaryāvatāra)* that laud precisely these activities.

An Indian “Bathing the Buddha Image” ritual commemorated Śākyamuni’s birthday in the month *Vaiśākha*. As described in the *Nīlamata Purāṇa* written in Kashmir (800 CE):

In the bright fortnight, the image of the Buddha is to be bathed with water containing all herbs, jewels, and scents and by uttering the words of the Buddha. The place is to be carefully besmeared with honey; the temple and stūpa must have frescoes, and there should be dancing and amusements.

This practice seems to have spread across all of Buddhist Asia. It is still popular today: on the festival day commemorating the Buddha’s birth, an image of a “baby Buddha” is placed on a stand in a large, decorated basin; using a ladle, Buddhist householders, one after the other, draw water from another bowl (that also contains flowers) and lustrate the image. (They imitate birth accounts that have the Hindu gods doing so at the Buddha’s birth in Lumbinī.)

Image *pūjā* (“ritual”) at this and many other times was practiced by entire monasteries in conjunction with the lay community, by family members together in their own homes,

and by individual monks with their private icons. Some texts provided additional practices to accompany this action, such as the popular Mahāyāna *The Vow of Benevolent Conduct* (*Bhadracaripraṇidhāna*) that specifies “A Ritual in Seven Stages” to be done before a buddha image:

- 1 Honor the Buddha
- 2 Serve the Buddha
- 3 Confession of misdeeds
- 4 Delight in good actions of beings
- 5 Invitation of Buddhas to preach the Dharma
- 6 Arouse the thought of one’s own future enlightenment
- 7 Dedication of merit to all beings

(Lamotte 1988: 433)

Here building on the first two practices that entail offerings and gestures of respect, merit-making is central to these and each other action. This sequence of ritual acts also incorporates practices that are thought to advance an individual’s spiritual maturity that are typical of the Mahāyāna path to awakening and altruism to all beings.

Many Buddhist texts across Asia mention detailed procedures for image worship, beginning with rites of consecration, periodic image-bathing ceremonies with anointed water along with repainting and repolishing; and how the icon would then be reinstated in the temple, with offerings of incense and flowers, accompanied by music.

Yijing underlines the immense merit earned by Buddha rituals:

The washing of the holy image is a meritorious deed which leads to a meeting with the Buddha in every birth, and the offering of incense and flowers is a cause of riches and joy in every life to come. Do it yourself, and teach others to do the same, then you will gain immeasurable blessings.

(Takakasu 1982: 151–152)

A popular Khotanese Mahāyāna text concurs, stating that anyone who makes a buddha image is guaranteed rebirth in future world era of the next buddha Maitreya. Another passage in this text has the Buddha state that worshipping an image is equal in merit to venerating him in person: “Whoever in my presence should perform rituals, or whoever should produce faith equally before an image, equal will be his many, innumerable, great merits. There is really no difference between them.” Thus, many Mahāyāna discourses, in agreement with the *Discourse of the Great Final Liberation*, laud as especially meritorious offerings of incense and flowers to buddha and bodhisattva images, all done with musical accompaniment (Emmerick 1968: 321).

Mobile Image Rituals: Buddha Image Processions and Ratha Yātrās

According to the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, the tradition of buddha image processions began under monastic supervision. As Schopen has pointed out from his reading of this work (2005), definitive for north India Buddhist monasteries, monks themselves were encouraged by the Buddha to carry out, and to supervise the propriety of, various festival celebrations. One, called in this work *Mahāmahā* (“Great Festival”) or “*Mahāpūjā*,”

entailed a procession of an image of the bodhisattva Siddhārtha as he meditated under a tree as a youth. The Vinaya authorizes the making of the image in the monastic precincts, decorating it with silks and ornaments, and then building a fittingly decorated palanquin or wagon to carry it. Monks are told they must be in charge of the image throughout the festival, from when it “goes into town,” to when it is taken “on a circuit of the region,” and they are instructed that upon return to the monastery it should end with dignity. This Vinaya clarifies how the participants from “across the region” should be fed by the sponsor and how to collect the rather great largesse that is given, and accumulated, by those wishing to “have *darśan*” (view) and honor the image.

Schopen (2005) refers above to the most extraordinary Indian form of buddha image veneration begun in late antiquity in numerous locations: the *ratha yātrā* (“chariot festival”). Faxian noted that in ancient Pāṭaliputra there were images of buddhas and bodhisattvas placed on twenty four-wheeled, five-story *rathas* made of wood and bamboo. Beginning on an *aṣṭamī day* and continuing for two nights, the local merchants (*vaiśya*) made vast donations from specially erected dwellings along the path; in Khotan, too, there was a fourteen-day event that was attended by the entire city, for which each monastery constructed a different four-wheeled *ratha* (Legge 1965: 18–19). Nepal’s surviving *ratha yātrās* focused on Avalokiteśvara have been documented (Locke 1980; Owens 1989).

MAHĀYĀNA TEXT FESTIVALS

Another Mahāyāna ritual focused on the “cult of the book” (Schopen 1975). According to the early *Perfection of Wisdom (Prajñāpāramitā)* texts, veneration of the Buddha’s Dharma is vastly superior to worshipping his bodily relics. A section of the *Lotus of the True Doctrine (Saddharna-puṇḍarīka-sūtra)* describes how the most superior ritual act is one in which a Mahāyāna text is venerated, especially while being carried on devotees’ heads (Hurvitz 1976: 82). This Indic custom also is still found in modern Nepal (Lewis 1993).

INDIAN MAHĀYĀNA VRATAS

Still surviving in the Himalayan region, Indic religious obligations (Skt. *vrata*; Tib. *nyungne*) are special Mahāyāna forms of Saṃgha-led, lay-sponsored ritual practice that focus on basic doctrines amidst devotional attention to a particular buddha or bodhisattva (Locke 1987; Lewis 1989). Doubtless originating in the lay wish to engage in spiritual practices on *uposatha* or *aṣṭamī* days, *vratas* were the means by which groups could devote one or more days to fasting, making offerings, meditating, hearing stories, and maintaining a high state of ritual purity. Tradition specifies a series of boons for each type of observance, and ~~all add appreciably~~ to one’s stock of merit.

PILGRIMAGE

Travel to venerate stūpas, bodhi trees, and images in monasteries, especially those marking important events in the Buddha’s life, also defined early Buddhist ritual practice (Lamotte 1988: 665). As the history of the great monarch Aśoka (ruled 273–232 BCE) indicates, this was perhaps the very earliest Buddhist ritual, one that conceivably could have led to the need to elaborate other early ritual practices as sites developed, shrines were built, and offerings grew in number (Gokhale 1980; Schopen 2005).

By 400 CE if not earlier, Chinese accounts suggest that such meritorious veneration of the Buddha's "sacred traces" was organized into extended processional rituals. Such texts also promise the laity vast improvements in their karma destiny as well as mundane benefits as rewards for undertaking pilgrimage. The development of pilgrimage traditions shaped the early composition of site-coordinated biographies of Śākyamuni (Lamotte 1988: 669; Strong 2001); the needs of pilgrims likely pressed monks to compile some of the first *Birth Stories* and *Legends* collections. The Mahāyāna tradition in China likewise developed pilgrimage traditions focused on great mountains, where visions of and blessings from celestial bodhisattvas were possible (e.g., Naquin and Yu 1992). The most famous and earliest established was probably at Mount Wutai 五台山 in northern China. Pilgrims residing there sought spiritual connections to Mañjuśrī. What is remarkable is the recently discovered fact that by 700 CE, monks dwelling in northern India went off on this arduous pilgrimage to China seeking this blessing!

Many Mahāyāna sources assert that sites identified with bodhisattvas were also centers of pilgrimage. As one Khotanese text affirms, "Whatever Bodhisattvas for the sake of *bodhi* have performed difficult tasks such as giving, this place I worship" (Emmerick 1968: 163). It is noteworthy how every missionized region of Asia developed its own Buddhist overlay of pilgrimage involving mountains and sites for saint veneration, with monasteries built to "colonize" the sacred venues.

BUDDHIST RITUALS FOR ROYALTY AND PAÑCAVĀRŚIKA

For most of its history, the Buddhist Saṃgha has existed in polities ruled by kings or emperors (Gokhale 1966). As a result, the tradition developed an exchange rapprochement: The monastic community adopted no rules to break state law; it also certified the monarch's moral standing by accepting his patronage and bestowed prestigious titles (bodhisattva, *dharma rāja* ["just king"], *mahādānapati* ["lord of great generosity"], *cakravartin* ["wheel-turning spiritual leader"]) to those who were most exemplary.

The just king is the first among laymen, and King Aśoka was the paradigm for later rulers (Strong 1983; Reynolds 1972). The early texts also mention an extraordinary quinquennial festival that Aśoka performed and that expresses the fundamental exchanges within the Buddhist polity: "*pañcavārśika*." It was a ritual orchestrating vast royal donations to the Saṃgha, other deserving ascetics, brahmans, and the destitute; it was also a time for displaying extraordinary images or renowned relics during festivities organized by kings and merchants, witnessed by a huge social gathering.

MERIT TRANSFER: RITUALS FOR PRETAS AND HELL-DWELLERS

From the earliest texts onward, Buddhist monks and laity have been instructed that merit is a kind of spiritual commodity. Once it has been earned (from rituals or donations) it can be shared with other beings with a simple verbal pronouncement of sending. In almost every locale where Buddhism has existed, and as we have seen for Indic monastics, it is a custom to put out food at special sites so that suffering hungry ghosts may find succor. Sharing merit also is nearly ubiquitous, whether it is to hungry ghosts, gods whose favor one wishes to attract, or to hell-dwellers whose time of intensive suffering can be lessened through

these transfers. This became a major ritual practice across the schools of Chinese Buddhism (Teiser 1988).

DEATH RITUALS

In all Buddhist societies, death rituals are the purview of the monastic community. The funeral and mourning rites are a major time for monastics to expound on the Dharma and for the Saṅgha to receive offerings, the merit of which is then transferred to the dead. Death is the critical time when an individual's karmic retribution plays out, and so the ritual traditions of assisting the dying to die in a peaceful state of mind and to make and get merit transferred to influence the ultimate rebirth destiny are the logical extensions of doctrine. In the tantric tradition, additional rites evolved to assist the dead in the “intermediate state” between births such as the Newar Buddhist tradition in Nepal that is associated with the *Elimination of All Evil Destinies Tantra* (*Durgatipariśodhana Tantra*) (Lewis 1994); the most famous such tradition known in the West is a late text, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Lopez 2011). In it, a tantric teacher (lama) offers advice to the disembodied individual's consciousness for seven weeks. Recent research and scholarly focus on this topic promises to clarify this important area of Buddhist ritual activity (Cuevas and Stone 2011; Williams and Ladwig 2012).

VOTIVE AMULETS AND RITUALS

Anyone traveling to a society where Buddhism is a living tradition, and who visits a major shrine, will inevitably find items for sale that householders purchase and deploy for protection, be they items to hang from their car's rearview mirror, in the kitchen, or around their necks or wrists. Important treatments of this vital area of monastic production (creating and empowering) and householder activity (purchase and use) can be seen for Thai Buddhism in Tambiah (1984), and for Japanese Buddhism in Tanaka and Reader (2004).

The votive tradition is anything but a modern innovation, as it has ancient origins. Archaeologists working on ancient Indic Buddhist sites (e.g., Taddei 1970) have found thousands of clay and metal items that were certainly the correlate of modern amulets made of plastic and cloth. Pilgrimage centers of old and sites like Bodh Gayā where the Buddha was awakened clearly had merchants who sold clay replicas of the shrine for rank-and-file pilgrims, while the richer might purchase metal images. Buddhist texts like the *Pañcarakṣā* depict the Buddha praising and recommending amulets that tap the power of the Dharma (e.g. Lewis 2000). Whatever the medium, these were doubtless taken back home to become part of the family shrine or car, or worn to garner the protection of empowered sacra sanctioned by the earliest tradition.

NEW RITUALS

Just as the urge to make merit is integral to Buddhist life, and as the ethos of adapting the tradition to changing times and locations is strong, so do monastics and householders feel free to devise new practices for merit-making and protection. There are many examples of this across the Buddhist world today, from *bokke fuji* ボケ封じ amulets introduced into Japan to combat senility, to the popularizing of “Bodhi Pūjā” (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988) in modern Sri Lanka. Once free to do so, Chinese Buddhists designed a host of new

Buddhist amulets for use in cars; in Nepal a new procession in connection with the *Collection of Names Tantra (Nāmasaṅghīti Tantra)* has been added in recent years to popularize a resurgence in this old meditation tradition dedicated to Mañjuśrī. The use of the Internet will doubtless reveal other innovations that take advantage of new technologies.

CONCLUSION

Whatever else we might surmise about Buddhism's vast and variegated history, it is clear that the tradition in every society ritualized spiritual ideals and incorporated pragmatic traditions into monastic iconography and ritualism, textual chanting, stūpa devotions, the festival year, and the life cycle rites of individuals. It is a universal phenomenon that all societies must train the young to perpetuate their cultural traditions. The success of Buddhism in reaching across Asia and beyond, in urban settings and villages, and among nomads conveys to the historian that this religion has effective means of conveying its doctrines and ideals through time.

One way of explaining this remarkable history is Buddhist ritual. In all its many variants, and in the hands of monastics free to improvise and who have been attuned to adapting the Dharma compassionately, ritual has always been at the center of Buddhist communities. It is an intervention that seeks to shape for the better the human experience, training in compassion, promoting generosity, imprinting a habit of analyzing the mind's tendencies, among many other goals. To use technical textual analytical vocabulary, rituals shape for the better (*kuśala*) an individual's *skandhas* (the five basic components of personhood): the physical body, sensations, perceptions, habit energies, and consciousness. So Buddhist ritual has been designed to shape consciously and beneficently the life experiences of its adherents; when vibrant, these practices ultimately pointed them away from suffering and toward advancement in spiritual maturity.

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