

This spectrum of concerns and approaches gives readers a global overview of questions related to women and Buddhism. Many readers will find inspiration in the essays as well as affirmation of the vitality and potential of women throughout the world.

RELICS, RITUAL, AND REPRESENTATION IN BUDDHISM: Rematerializing the Sri Lankan Theravāda Tradition. By Kevin Trainor, Cambridge Studies in Religious Traditions 10. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

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JŌKEI (1155–1213), a Japanese Hossō Buddhist monk of the Kamakura period, wrote a number of liturgical works, including one dealing with relic worship. In this document, called *Shari kōshiki*, he declares:

I vow that, on the basis of the power of the relics, I will quickly arouse the aspiration for enlightenment. The Buddha's original vow states, "After my nirvāṇa, (I will be) transformed into my relics, and make sentient beings whom I teach arouse the aspiration for enlightenment. . . ." It should be known that our arousing of the aspiration for enlightenment and our attainment of Buddhahood are solely due to the power of Śākyamuni's relics.¹

In this passage, Jōkei asserts that, after Śākyamuni Buddha passed away, one can achieve enlightenment by worshipping the Buddha's relics left behind in this world. When I first read this passage many years ago, I wondered, "How is this possible?" Unfortunately, Jōkei himself does not explain how the worship of Śākyamuni's relics can result in Buddhahood.

Kevin Trainor's stimulating new study, *Relics, Ritual, and Representation: Rematerializing the Sri Lankan Theravāda Tradition*, takes up the phenomenon of

¹ The text of Jōkei's *Shari kōshiki* which I have used is found in the eleventh fascicle of the *Kanrin juyō* 翰林拾葉, preserved in the Ōtani University library. The text is undated. The *Kanrin juyō* is a collection of Buddhist documents and texts copied by Kenshō Gusen 顯証弘宣 during the Meiji period. Unfortunately, like the other fascicles in this collection, the eleventh fascicle is unpaginated. According to its colophon, the *Shari kōshiki* was copied by Kenshō on 4/16/1883 (Meiji 16) from a text preserved at the Hōgon-in 宝嚴院, a subtemple within Tōdaiji.

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relic veneration in the Sinhalese Theravāda tradition, and in the process provides some keys for resolving the question that Jōkei's liturgical work raised in my mind. According to a passage found at the beginning of the book, "The author portrays relic veneration as a technology of remembrance and representation which makes present the Buddha of the past for living Buddhists" (p. i). In Trainor's view, worship of relics serves to "make present" the Buddha to the faithful. Through this encounter, the Buddha's blessings (even the eventual attainment of Buddhahood) are made available to the believer.

Chapter One, entitled "Orientations," contains a provocative polemic against the traditional way in which the study of the Buddhist religion has been carried out in the West. The primary emphasis of Western scholarship on Buddhism has been on the interpretation and analysis of Buddhist texts. This philological bias was not dominant in the initial period of Western Buddhist scholarship. Early reports by Europeans on Buddhist temples from Sri Lanka included fairly detailed descriptions of their images and rituals. However, with the increasing availability of Pāli texts and their translations in Europe and America (thanks to the work of the Pāli Text Society), Buddhism came to be defined as a body of doctrines contained within these texts. As a result of this shift, which reflects the rationalistic presuppositions of Victorian England, the study of cultic elements of Sinhalese Buddhism, including the study of relics, was completely neglected. Even when confronted with undeniable evidence that relics were of utmost importance to Sinhalese Buddhists, Western scholars and Buddhist enthusiasts refused to admit that relics could hold a vital role in the Buddhist religion. In reply to a Theravāda monk's offer to send him the Buddha's relics, for example, Paul Carus wrote, "The worship of relics, be they bones, hair, teeth, or any other material of the body of the saint is a mistake. . . . The soul of the Buddha is not in his bones, but in his words, and I regard relic-worship as an incomplete stage of the religious worship in which devotees have not yet attained to full philosophical clearness" (cited on p. 19).

Trainor sees his study of relics as a corrective to such a "spiritualized" view of Buddhism. One of the aims of his book is to "rematerialize" the study of Sinhalese Buddhism by focusing on the actual practices and devotional dimensions of this religion. As Trainor himself notes, such an approach has precedents in a number of influential anthropological studies on Sri Lankan village religious practices published since the sixties, such as Richard Gombrich's *Precept and Practice: Traditional Buddhism in the Rural Highlands of Ceylon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), Gananath Obeyesekere's *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), as well as Gombrich's and Obeyesekere's joint study, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

Trainor sees the practice of relic veneration as a "technology of remembrance and representation," through which Buddhist devotees can gain access to the Buddha,

who passed away into nirvāṇa over 2500 years ago. Although the Buddha is no longer in the world (having gained liberation from the cycle of birth and death), paradoxically for Sinhalese Buddhists, the Buddha was, and still remains, an active presence in their lives. Indeed, he is treated as someone to be called upon directly as "Lord Buddha." As Trainor notes,

The tradition, nevertheless, also testifies that the utter passing away of the Buddha did not put an end to his presence, and that his presence is not limited to the teaching he left behind. Through the legacy of his corporeal remains, all of the extraordinary qualities attributed to the corporeal form of the Buddha during his lifetime continued to be present in the midst of the Buddhist community. (p. 187)

Indeed, the sage is treated as someone to be directly addressed in rituals of veneration as "Lord Buddha." Trainor explains,

Unlike the Mahāyāna tradition, which affirms the simultaneous existence of countless Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who can interact directly with devotees, the Theravāda tradition has consistently maintained that what we call the "historical" Buddha has passed out of the realm of *saṃsāra* and is not thus directly accessible. And yet, as the chronicles attest, the Buddha's presence, mediated through texts, relics, and images, continues to shape the behavior of Theravāda Buddhists in the context of rituals of veneration. Thus the Buddha of "then" and "over there" can become the Buddha of "here" and "now" through particular textual and ritual strategies. (pp. 143–4)

As Trainor argues here, the veneration of relics (together with the stūpas enshrining them) was one of the primary means by which believers experientially gained access to the Buddha, who is utterly inaccessible, having passed away into nirvāṇa long ago.

In the second chapter, "Buddhist Relic Veneration in India," Trainor presents a brief but useful discussion of selected aspects of relic worship in India. After summarizing the various interpretations concerning the origin of the terms "stūpa" and "*caitya*" (both indicating mounds built over Buddhist relics), he points out that the dramatic growth of the Buddhist religion in India after the third century B. C. E. is due in substantial part to the patronage of King Asoka, who is traditionally credited with constructing 84,000 stūpas in various regions of his realm. Throughout the book, Trainor emphasizes that Aśoka provides the authoritative paradigm for Buddhist kingship and that his act of building stūpas enshrining the Buddha's remains is considered one of the paradigmatic actions of a Buddhist ruler.

The latter part of the chapter analyzes the locus classicus of the Theravāda cult of Buddhist relic worship: the passage in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* describing how,

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after the Buddha's death and subsequent cremation, his remains (i. e., relics) were divided into eight parts, which were then carried to different regions of India and enshrined in stūpas. Interestingly, the sūtra declares that before his death, the Buddha warned his disciples not to concern themselves with the worship of his relics; laymen may venerate them, but monks should devote themselves to seeking the highest goal, the attainment of nirvāṇa. These words have long been understood by Western scholars to mean that relic worship was deemed inappropriate for members of the monastic community. However, as Trainor argues in detail, such a view ignores the important role that the relics have played in actual Theravāda religious practice. Indeed, many Pāli texts, including the *Milindapañha* and *Kathāvatthu*, treat participation in the relic cult as fully compatible with the quest for nirvāṇa, and even present evidence that it was integrated into the daily life of monks, particularly those who pursued a life of intensive meditation.

After summarizing in the third chapter the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka and the important role played by relics in this process, in the fourth chapter, "Paradigms of Presence," Trainor takes up the interesting phenomenon of relic theft. The theft of relics in medieval Christianity was the topic of Patrick Geary's fascinating study, *Furta Sacra: Theft of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978). Taking his cue from Geary's book, Trainor argues that relics are sources of sacred power, and once removed to a new locality, the relic has the power to transform that site into a new center of sacrality. Many stories of relic theft serve to explain why a relic was transferred to a new location, turning that place into a sanctified area.

Sinhalese texts like the *Thūpavaṃsa* and *Dhātuvaṃsa* feature stories to account for how and why some of the Buddha's relics were transferred from India to Sri Lanka, thus turning certain areas of the island into sites sacred to Buddhism. Since the relics are objects of power (and hence highly valuable), those in possession of the relics are understandably unwilling to part with them. Thus, quite often, the relics must be obtained through force or trickery, i. e., theft. However, this is problematic, for "taking what is not given" (*adinnādāna*) is a serious crime according to the Vinaya rules. For this reason, to account for the transfer of relics from one site to another, the Sinhalese chronicles claim that (1) the move was predicted by the Buddha himself, and (2) the relics were removed by arhats whose only wish was to make the relic available to a larger group of people. By arguing either that the move of the relic was a foreordained event, or that they were transferred, not out of selfish motives, but out of a pure desire to make the relic accessible to a larger audience, these stories legitimize the transfer of relics to their new location while exculpating the person who took the relic.

In the fifth chapter, "Ritual and the Presence of the Buddha," Trainor explores the ways in which ritual actions function to make the long-deceased Buddha (and his "blessings") accessible to present-day believers. Despite the widely-held opinion

that Pāli Buddhism is critical of ritual observances, devotion to the Buddha has always been an important element of the religious life of Sinhalese monks. However, Pāli Buddhist scholars had great difficulty reconciling relic veneration with their standard doctrinal position that the Buddha, now that he is utterly extinguished in nirvāṇa, could have no influence on this world. Following the orthodox position, they held that the Buddha does not directly intervene on behalf of the devotee. Instead, they argued, on the basis of the theory of causality, that the relics serve as the "support" of merit-making actions; the benefits that derive from relic worship is the result of the fruition of one's own act of devotion and not the result of intervention by the Buddha. Thus, the result of worship is wholly due to the law of causality and is independent of the Buddha (p. 161–2).

In a less scholastic vein, the Sinhalese historical chronicles provide another theory: that the veneration of relics derives their efficacy from the power of the resolution that the Buddha made at the time of his death (p. 163). Moreover, the relics are believed to be imbued with special powers. For example, the *Thūpavaṃsa*, a Pāli work on the Buddha's relics, relates that when a relic of the Buddha was enshrined in the famous Mahāthūpa (Great Stūpa) at Anurādhapura by King Duṭṭhagāmaṇī, the relic spontaneously rose high into the sky and took on the shape of the Buddha adorned with the thirty-two major and eighty minor marks of a great being. Even today in Sri Lanka, relics are believed capable of performing miracles. In 1991, the Colombo *Daily News* reported that during the white-washing of the same Mahāthūpa mentioned above, "the waxing moon and its aureole took the shape of Sri Lanka in the clear night sky" (p. 172–3); another newspaper interpreted this miracle as a "good omen foretelling that peace, harmony, and unity will come to Sri Lanka" (p. 173, note 87). Trainor adds,

... for those who witness these marvels, and who make ritualized offerings directed towards the relics, the Buddha is experientially present and available in precisely the same ways that he was present and available during his lifetime, and the fact that he remains present in this manner is attributed to his compassionate regard for those trapped in the cycle of *saṃsāra*. (p. 166)

The sight of such miracles wrought by the relics inspires faith (or confidence/trust; *saddhā*) in the devotees, and makes the Buddha and his blessings available to them.

In the pages above, I have summarized some of the interesting points of Trainor's arguments. Of course, the discussions found in the book itself are richer and much more complex than I have indicated. Although some readers may find those parts of the book dealing with theoretical issues hard going, this volume provides a stimulating interpretation of the phenomenon of relic veneration in Buddhism.