

*Symposium: New Roads in Theravāda Studies*

## **The Road Less Travelled: From Landways to Seaways in the Study of Theravāda Buddhism**

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Although Charles Hallisey’s seminal 1995 essay is primarily concerned with the ways European colonial scholars approached Theravāda Buddhism in majority Theravāda contexts, its emphasis on two key topics—the importance of ritual and the dynamics of the “local production of meaning”—laid the foundation for a range of recent studies that explore the history and contemporary developments of Theravāda Buddhist communities in the Malay Archipelago. This article charts how the neglected topics Hallisey urged scholars to attend to have opened new pathways for the study of Theravāda minority communities. Drawing on recent studies of Theravāda Buddhist communities in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, I discuss how Theravāda Buddhists established institutions, participated in rituals, and relied on vernacular and non-canonical texts to preserve their sense of diasporic identity and ensure the survival of Buddhism as a minority religion.

**Keywords:** Indonesia; Malaysia; Singapore; Maritime Southeast Asia; Southeast Asian Buddhism

I begin this paper with a confession: I have hardly considered myself a scholar of Theravāda Buddhism. What first attracted me to the study of “Southeast Asian Buddhism” was my interest in Chinese immigration. Born and raised in Singapore, I was drawn to the beliefs and practices of the Chinese diaspora communities in Southeast Asia since I was an undergraduate student. Therefore, by the time I went to graduate school, I already knew I wanted to write about the lesser known and rarely studied Chinese Buddhist communities in the maritime Southeast Asian states of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. Though I was aware of the existence of a minority Theravāda Buddhist population in the predominantly Islamic and Catholic region, I was more concerned with the study of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism—yet another minority religion in the region—and its significance in the Chinese diaspora.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For studies on Chinese Buddhism in maritime Southeast Asia, see, for instance, Chen (2004), Chia (2020), Tan (2020), and Xu (2013).

During my graduate work at Cornell, Anne Blackburn taught me Pali and introduced me to the scholarship on Theravāda studies. Blackburn's article on Ceylonese Buddhism in colonial Singapore (2012),<sup>2</sup> and my subsequent archival research and fieldwork, exposed me to the vibrant presence of Theravāda Buddhism, as well as the interactions and collaborations between Mahāyānists and Theravādins in the maritime world of Southeast Asia.<sup>3</sup> As Justin McDaniel rightly points out, Theravādins are not the only Buddhists in Southeast Asia, and they are also not limited to mainland Southeast Asia (2010: 659). Compared to the extensive literature on Theravāda Buddhism on the mainland, the scholarly examination of the Theravādin minority in the maritime region is a road less travelled in the study of Theravāda Buddhism.<sup>4</sup> And yet, unknown to many perhaps, studies of Theravāda Buddhism in maritime Southeast Asia point to larger ways that diasporic communities, institutions, and nations define religion and how those definitions are accepted, challenged, and reshaped on the local level.

Charles Hallisey's seminal 1995 essay is primarily concerned with the ways European colonial scholars approached Theravāda Buddhism in majority Theravāda contexts, namely in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Burma, Cambodia, Ceylon, and Siam. As such, Hallisey's piece does not deal directly with the study of Theravāda Buddhism as a minority religion in maritime Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, Hallisey's emphasis on two key topics—the importance of ritual and the dynamics of the “local production of meaning”—laid the foundation for a range of recent studies that explore the history and contemporary developments of Theravāda Buddhist communities in the Malay Archipelago (1995: 47–51). I argue that Hallisey's call to explore rituals and texts produced in local circumstances has provided the framework of salient topics necessary for studying Theravāda Buddhism as a minority religion in this Muslim-majority region.

The present essay charts how the neglected topics Hallisey urged scholars to attend to have opened new pathways for the study of Theravāda minority communities. In the sections that follow, I emphasize the ways in which attention to both rituals and local texts has informed work on Theravāda Buddhism in maritime Southeast Asia by Anne Blackburn (2012), Andrew Johnson (2016), Irving Johnson (2013), Pattana Kitiarsa (2010), Jeffrey Samuels (2011; 2013), and myself (2018). Although these scholars did not conceive their projects as direct responses to Hallisey's concerns, their work nevertheless fruitfully extends the framework of “Roads Taken and Not Taken” to minority communities in the Southeast Asian archipelago. These scholars show us how Theravāda Buddhists established institutions, participated in rituals, and relied on vernacular and non-canonical texts to preserve their sense of diasporic identity and ensure the survival of Buddhism as a minority religion.

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Blackburn prefers to use the term “Southern Asian Buddhism” to refer to Buddhists and practices oriented towards Pali-language liturgy and scripture, as the use of the term “Theravāda” only became more common from the 1930s onward. See Blackburn (2012: 5).

<sup>3</sup> For a study of interactions between Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhists, see Zhang (2018).

<sup>4</sup> For bibliographies on Buddhism in Southeast Asia, see, for instance, Blackburn and Patton (2019) and Paseng (2021).

### Ritual and Memory in the Diaspora

In his essay, Hallisey highlights the artificial separation of Buddhism and ritual by early scholars in the study of the Theravādin world. He points out that Rhys Davids and his contemporaries neglected the study of Buddhist ritual life (1995: 46–47). Following the publication of Hallisey’s essay, scholars of Theravāda Buddhism have turned their attention to the study of vernacular and ritual texts in South and Southeast Asia, as Trent Walker explores in his article for this special section. More recently, John Holt’s *Theravada Traditions* (2017) offers a comparative study of the most popular rites most widely observed within the Theravāda Buddhist-majority countries of Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia.

When Theravāda Buddhists migrated from their South and Southeast Asian homelands to the Malay Archipelago, they brought their faith and ritual practices to their new host countries. Anne Blackburn demonstrates how Ceylonese migration to colonial Singapore during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century contributed to the establishment of “Theravāda” Buddhist ritual and devotional spaces. Ceylonese Buddhists, as Blackburn writes, “sought access to Buddhist ritual space and ritual specialists, especially in response to illness and death” (2012: 4). She also notes that prior to the founding of a permanent ritual space in Singapore, Ceylonese Buddhists there relied on the occasional visits of Ceylonese monks in transit to British Malaya, Burma, or Siam; other southern Asian Buddhists that shared the use of Pali-language ritual and scripture; and Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhists whose Buddhist heritage owed more to Chinese-language texts for their ritual needs (Blackburn 2012: 17).

Ceylonese also migrated to colonial Malaya and set up Theravāda Buddhist temples in the Muslim-majority country. Jeffrey Samuels illustrates that Sri Lankan Buddhist temples are important diasporic institutions for the celebration of calendrical rites, rituals, and festivals, as well as the operation of religious and language schools.<sup>5</sup> He argues that Sri Lankan temples in Malaysia provide Sri Lankan Buddhists with the “social context” and reproduce the devotees’ “social memory” of Sri Lanka, allowing the community in Malaysia to maintain their own collective identity as Sri Lankans living in the diaspora. In other words, Buddhist temples serve a significant function for the Sri Lankan diaspora, preserving the community’s cultural identity through religion and language (Samuels 2013: 121–122). Moreover, Samuels notices that growing interest in Theravāda Buddhism among Chinese Malaysian Buddhists has altered Sri Lankan monastic culture in Malaysia. Some Sinhalese Buddhists lament that their Theravāda temples subsequently became exposed to Chinese Buddhist iconography, new rituals, and new festive celebrations (2013: 124–125). Samuels’s study shows that rituals not only have an important place in the religious life of Sri Lankan Theravādins, but also serve as a cornerstone for the preservation of their diasporic identity. In addition, interactions between Sri Lankan Theravāda and Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhists have contributed to the production of new local practices in Malaysia. In light of Hallisey’s call to pay attention to ritual, Blackburn and Samuels’s articles reveal the importance of ritual spaces and specialists among Sri Lankan Buddhists in Malaysia and Singapore.

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<sup>5</sup> For further reading on Buddhism and diaspora, see, for example, Bao (2015), Lopes (2015), and Suh (2012).

### Blessings, Objects, and Temples

Like their Sri Lankan counterparts, Thai Buddhists made their way to maritime Southeast Asia during the colonial period and established temples in Singapore. Wat Ananda, the oldest and most prominent Thai Buddhist temple in Singapore, was established in 1923 by a travelling missionary monk, Luang Pho Hong. The monastery continues to be supported by the Thai government through the embassy. Pattana Kitiarsa's study shows that many more Thai Buddhist temples were established in Singapore after the Second World War and especially during the 1980s (2010: 260–262). Kitiarsa offers fascinating insights into the “exportation of Buddhist monks, canonical knowledge, ritualized skills, and religious objects” from Thailand to Singapore. He observes that many Thai Theravāda monks are “magical and ritual specialists” who have been invited by their Thai or Singaporean Chinese followers to “give sermons, provide magical services, perform special rituals, and offer astrological readings and consultations” in Singapore (2010: 264). He also discusses how rituals are an important part of Thai religious life in the diaspora. Most of the Thai Buddhist temples in Singapore, as Kitiarsa highlights, have assigned monks to conduct ritual blessings and consultations in the main shrine for both Thai and Singaporean devotees on a daily or weekly basis (2010: 266). Kitiarsa concludes that the growth of Thai Buddhism in Singapore since the 1980s is the result of “strong spiritual and administrative ties between the Buddhist authorities and communities in Thailand and Singapore,” as well as the popular demand for Thai monks’ “magical rituals and amulets” by the Singaporean Chinese Buddhist community (2010: 269–270).

The collective attention to minority Theravāda Buddhist communities reveals that Chinese Mahāyānists are interested in, and sought to participate, in rituals, acquiring objects, and engaging with “nonhuman beings” (as discussed by Alexandra Kaloyanides) of their Theravādin counterparts. Andrew Johnson further investigates the popularity of Thai Buddhism among Chinese Singaporean Buddhists. His research reveals how many Singaporeans considered Thai Buddhist objects as “older” and “more powerful” sources of potency than Chinese religious products (Johnson 2016: 447). As Johnson points out, Thai Theravāda Buddhism becomes mobilized in “a new, hybrid form,” as demonstrated by his respondents’ interchangeable use of “Thai Buddhist,” “voodoo,” and “occult” along with “Thai *barang*” (2016: 449). The most fascinating discovery in Johnson’s research is the commodification and consumption of so-called Theravāda “Thai *barang*,” such as corpse oil and roasted fetuses, among the Chinese in Singapore (2016: 450). Chinese Singaporean Buddhists consider them as sacred Buddhist objects and seek Thai monks to consecrate these religious artifacts. These two studies by Pattana Kitiarsa and Andrew Johnson are concerned not only with ritual, but also with the dynamics Hallisey calls “the local production of meaning.” Taken together, their works reveal that ritual ceremonies and religious objects in the Singaporean context have much more to do with the popularization of Thai Theravāda Buddhism than with canonical knowledge or texts.

In contrast to Singapore—where Thai migrant monks, along with their Thai and Chinese patrons, contributed to the arrival and expansion of Thai Buddhism—Kelantanese Thai Buddhists have long been living in Malaysia’s northeastern-most state of Kelantan. In *The Buddha on Mecca’s Verandah* (2013), Irving Johnson uses the Thai Buddhist village of Ban Bor On as a case study to explore how Kelantanese Thai Buddhists as an ethnic and religious minority define and negotiate a unique

identity for themselves in Malay-Muslim majority Malaysia. Johnson demonstrates how villagers in Ban Bor On support Buddhist temples and depend on these religious institutions for their ritual focus. He notes that Ban Bor On's villagers publicly celebrate their "Thainess" and Buddhist faith through the spectacle of ordination parades on the Thai-Malaysian border (Johnson 2013: 42–47). Johnson also observes that interactions between Thai Theravādins and Chinese Mahāyānists led to the rise in the number of Chinese visitors to Kelantan's Thai temples and the construction of Chinese-inspired statues and structures in Thai temple compounds across the Malay state (2013: 94–95). More intriguingly, Johnson suggests that many of the temple abbots in the village, despite their religious positions, have only basic knowledge of Buddhist teachings, and they see erecting temple structures and sculptures as a way to justify their elevated social and ritual role (2013: 99–100). Therefore, Kelantanese Thai monks are respected and remembered in the village not for their scriptural knowledge, but for their temple building endeavors, architectural achievements, and ritual prowess. Once again, following Hallisey's attention to ritual and local meaning-making helps illuminate how Theravāda Buddhism functions as a minority religion in a Muslim-majority region.

### **When Theravāda Meets Mahāyāna**

My recent work looks at how Indonesian Chinese monk Ashin Jinarakkhita (1923–2002) sought to make Buddhism less Chinese and more indigenous to ensure the survival of the religion in Muslim-majority Indonesia (Chia, 2018). Born as Tee Boon An, Ashin Jinarakkhita was first ordained as a Chinese Mahāyāna monk in Indonesia before receiving his higher ordination in the Theravāda tradition in Burma under the tutelage of Mahāsi Sayādaw. Subsequently, he founded the Indonesian Buddhayāna movement to promote an indigenous "Indonesian Buddhism" for a culturally and linguistically diverse Indonesia. Dressed in a Theravāda saffron robe and wearing a beard in the Chinese Mahāyāna style, Ashin Jinarakkhita considered himself neither a Mahāyāna nor a Theravāda monk, but a combination of both.

My approach to the Buddhayāna movement reinforces the importance of Hallisey's call to "expect meaning to be produced in local circumstances rather than in the origins of the tradition" (1995: 50). For instance, Buddhayāna's liturgical text, *A Guide to the Buddha Dhamma (Penuntun Buddha Dhamma)*, reveals two major characteristics of Buddhayāna's liturgical practices. First, it demonstrates the attempt to indigenize Buddhism in Indonesia: the national anthem of Indonesia is printed in the opening pages. Furthermore, the translation into Bahasa Indonesia of the Pali devotional passages and scriptures is provided next to the original text. As most Indonesian Buddhists cannot read Pali, the Bahasa Indonesia translations help them understand the passages they chant. Second, the liturgical text reveals a hybrid mix of Theravāda and Mahāyāna devotional practices among Buddhayāna members. Although the liturgical book looks like a typical Theravāda Pali-language liturgical text that begins with the salutation to the Buddha (*vandanā*), threefold refuge (*tisarana*), and five precepts (*pañcasīlāni*), followed by Pali scriptures such as the *Discourse on Blessings (Mahā-mangala Sutta)* and the *Discourse on Jewels (Ratana Sutta)*, it also contains Mahāyāna scriptures and mantras such as the *Dhāraṇī of Great Compassion* and *Heart Sūtra*, as well as instructions for making "healing water" (Chia 2018: 41–43).

Following the 1965 coup and Suharto's rise to power, Suharto's anticommunist authoritarian regime promulgated new laws to assimilate the Chinese Indonesian population and sought to use religion as a tool to counter communism. Ashin Jinarakkhita was quick to adjust his strategies to ensure the survival of Buddhism during the New Order period (1966–1998). He introduced the concept of Sang Hyang Adi-Buddha as the Buddhist version of "God Almighty" to make Buddhism compatible with the Pancasila principle of "belief in the one Almighty God."<sup>6</sup> The monk strategically claimed that the concept of Sang Hyang Adi-Buddha could be found in the *Sang Hyang Kamahāyānikan*, a non-canonical text produced during the reign of King Mpu Sindok, the founder of the Isyana dynasty in Java, during the tenth-century. In the 1970s, Buddhayāna's texts, such as *The God in Buddhism (Ketuhanan dalam Agama Buddha)*, compiled by Ashin Jinarakkhita's disciple, Upi Dhammavadi, introduced the devotional salutation "Namo Sang Hyang Adi-Buddhaya," which was to be recited before the usual Pali salutation "Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa" (Chia 2018: 53–56). Nevertheless, Sang Hyang Adi-Buddha was a double-edged sword for Ashin Jinarakkhita and his Buddhayāna movement. On the one hand, the non-canonical concept was accepted by Suharto's government, thus ensuring that Buddhism continued to be one of the recognized religions in Indonesia. On the other hand, it was met with criticism from Theravāda monastics, which eventually led to a schism in the Sangha in Indonesia (Chia 2018: 57–60).

### Concluding Thoughts

Buddhist minorities in Southeast Asia, and in Asia more generally, are a lesser-studied group. Even though Hallisey's essay does not directly highlight this phenomenon, it raises questions that can help us consider the evolution and dynamics of minority Buddhist communities. As Hallisey convincingly suggests, Buddhism should be studied and contextualized as part of the "intellectual and cultural history" of the locale (1995: 46). His recommendation still rings true a quarter-century later. As we have seen in this article, recent studies on Theravāda Buddhism in maritime Southeast Asia have offered a window of understanding on how Theravāda Buddhists lived as religious minorities vis-à-vis Muslims and Christians, as well as Chinese Buddhists, Taoists, and folk religionists within local contexts. Hallisey's call to focus on ritual and the local production of meaning have been echoed by many scholars working on Theravāda Buddhism in maritime Southeast Asia. This burgeoning body of scholarship, which shifts the usual geographical focus away from Sri Lanka and mainland Southeast Asia, is beginning to tell us how Theravāda Buddhists have to constantly negotiate and adjust their strategy of engagements and interactions based on the specific local conditions.

The differing historical and social realities of Theravādin communities in maritime Southeast Asia comprise an understudied area that deserves more scholarly attention. Further studies on the Theravādin minority can contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics between majority and minority religions and how such interactions play into the political, social, and cultural landscape of Southeast Asia. They can also help us reimagine the region in ways that notions of nation states and majority religions have obscured.

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<sup>6</sup> Pancasila refers to the five philosophical principles of the Indonesian nation.

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