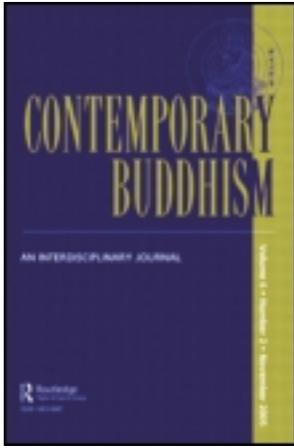


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The Theravāda Civilizations Project: future directions in the study of Buddhism in Southeast Asia

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NOTICE

THE THERAVĀDA CIVILIZATIONS PROJECT: FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN THE STUDY OF BUDDHISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Juliane Schober and Steven Collins

The aim of this notice is to share with interested colleagues in Buddhist Studies and related fields the present and future activities of the Theravāda Civilizations Project, which is in initial operation during 2011–2014, with generous support from the Henry Luce Foundation under its Asia Responsive Grants Initiative. The Principal Investigator is Juliane Schober at Arizona State University, through which the project is being administered; Co-Principal Investigator is Steven Collins at the University of Chicago. Overall, the project envisions: (1) three international conferences, in Toronto in March 2012, Arizona State in March 2013, and Chiang Mai in summer of 2014; (2) workshops, at each of these meetings, for doctoral students and post-doctoral researchers; (3) a website with research findings, teaching materials, bibliographies, audio-visual resources, etc.; and (4) the publication of edited research collections. Arizona State University has committed substantial direct and in-kind support; the University of Toronto will contribute funds in support of the 2012 conference held there; and the École française d'Extrême-Orient will provide conference facilities in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in 2014. Core members of the project have met twice in previous years, at Arizona State University (ASU), March 2009 and in Chicago, September of 2010. The conference programmes for these two meetings (both of which were entitled 'Theravāda encounters with modernity'), and that in Toronto 2012, are given in Appendix 1; faculty participants are given in Appendix 2.

Through these collaborative exchanges among scholars based in the US, Canada, Britain, and Southeast Asia, we are undertaking the first systematic comparative study of Theravāda civilizations since the publication of

Anthropological studies in Theravāda Buddhism (Nash, 1966) and *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft in den Ländern des Theravāda-Buddhismus* (Bechert, 1966–1973). We draw on a range of disciplinary approaches from history, the anthropology of religion, modern ethnography, and textual studies of Pali and vernacular literatures. This project aims to bring together, in a sustained manner, a group of leading experts to formulate a comparative and multi-disciplinary understanding of Theravāda Buddhism, a religion practised by more than 150 million people around the world, at a moment when eminent scholars are retiring and younger scholars in the academy interrogate received intellectual legacies. In most cases, scholars of Theravāda Buddhism are isolated within their institutions, with few or no professional colleagues in the field: we aim to provide a forum for sustained inter-institutional and inter-disciplinary conversation among such specialists, to develop new strategies for research and teaching about Theravāda Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.

Elsewhere in Asia, the study of Buddhism tends to be primarily defined by a single national language such as Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Tibetan, and their classical antecedents. By contrast, the study of Theravāda Buddhism relies on a textual tradition in Pali, which is shared across much of mainland Southeast Asia and which, in its entirety, Collins has termed the *Pali imaginaire* (1998). Indeed, Pali in South and Southeast Asia is one of the languages singled out by Benedict Anderson as exemplifying, in his view, the kind of linguistic trans-local vehicle for imagining communities before modern nationalism.¹ Since roughly the fifth century C.E., Pali Buddhist inscriptions and texts deeply influenced the development of vernacular literatures and local, cultural practices in what are now the modern nations of mainland Southeast Asia, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Consequently, Theravāda Buddhist civilizations have flourished for many centuries in what are now the countries of Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Sri Lanka. Today, the practice of this branch of Buddhism extends to Yunnan in Southwestern China, to parts of Vietnam, Indonesia, Nepal, among Dalits in India, and throughout Diaspora networks in Europe, North America, and Australia. In Buddhist communities in all of these places, local and modern articulations of ancient Buddhist traditions are changing rapidly in the context of globalization.

The proposed study of Theravāda civilizations interrogates both concepts of 'Theravāda' and 'civilization(s)' in light of earlier work and in light of the cultural fragmentation, secularization of political power and religious revitalization so characteristic of modern societies. 'Theravāda', as a term for a socio-religious tradition involving laity as well as monks, is now known to be a modern, nineteenth century western invention, which has become widespread among Buddhists within Southeast Asia since a decision by the international World Fellowship of Buddhists in the early 1950s to use the term as an alternative to the pejorative 'Hīnayāna' ('Lesser Vehicle') and to the imprecise 'Southern Buddhism', which were at that time widely used. Previously, the (rare) term 'Theravāda' was used to refer solely either to: (1) a monastic ordination tradition, or set of traditions, which saw themselves as going back to the Elders (*thera-s*) at the first three Councils in India;

or (2) a set of doctrinal positions, as outlined, for example, in the canonical *Abhidhamma* text, the *Kathāvatthu*. In this perspective, the phrase 'Theravāda Civilizations' is an absurdity, indeed an impossibility. No lay person before modern times (and even now, only certain people in certain contexts) would have called or will now call themselves 'a Theravādin'. Yet we agree with Peter Skilling, who wrote recently at the end of a survey of the use of the word before modern times: 'I do not propose that we abandon the use of the term Theravāda — that would be absurd — but I do suggest that we do our best to understand its historical context, and that we keep it in rein.'²

The question of what constitutes a 'civilization' or a set of 'civilizations' is also a complex set of contested issues which we aim to discuss rather than take for granted. Some of the issues are mentioned below.

Research questions driving the Theravāda Civilizations Project focus on continuity and innovation of religious thought and practices, Buddhist hegemony and the submergence of divergent practices, the role of modernizing reforms in the nineteenth century that shaped what western scholars have come to term 'Theravāda Buddhism,' and the fragmentation of Buddhist institutions in light of modern conditions. An academic agenda for future conferences has been shaped around central project concerns, such as:

- (1) *Theorizing 'civilizational' studies*: moving on from Robert Redfield's distinction between Great and Little Traditions, to investigating historically and in contemporary ethnography a modern Buddhist cosmopolitanism: what is (or is imagined to be) trans-local in Theravāda civilization? Examples include the travels and spatial 'establishment' of images, relics, texts and monastic initiation traditions, as these moved, often with royal support, back and forth between areas of Southeast Asia, and between Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka.
- (2) *'Civilization' and Buddhist 'missionization' in history and in contemporary practice*: is 'mission' a valid way to theorize the civilizational expansion of Theravāda? How is it affected by the modern diaspora communities, and the various modernist Buddhisms which are attracting very large numbers of western 'converts'?
- (3) *A re-appraisal of Buddhist historiography*, especially its indigenous chronicles and *vamsa* traditions. Several members of the group have been working on these, in Burma, Thailand and Sri Lanka. How does such historiography fit into a general Buddhist attitude to temporality, where our Buddha Gotama is merely one in an infinite series of Truth-Discoverers, not a unique prophet such as Jesus or Muhammad, and where the Truth they discover is a-historical? How should western (and other) academic historians make use of such texts?
- (4) *An inventory of local and oral Buddhist literatures among ethnic minorities*: members of the group have been involved in projects making inventories of local literatures, in the Shan language areas of Burma and Thailand, in Thailand and Laos, and in Sri Lanka. How do we assess the role of such literatures in 'Theravāda' civilization(s) and in their relationship to Pali textual tradition(s)?

- (5) *Buddhist governmentality*: Theravāda civilizations have always, like most civilizations everywhere, flourished in plains surrounding rivers, and in the cities built there.³ There has always been an ambiguous, often contested relationship between such state-systems and the many and various hill-tribes in the swathe of mountains which stretches from Northeast India to Vietnam. Such state-systems relied on populations of wet-rice cultivators, as tax-payers, corvée labour and in military conscription; they have also provided the technological infrastructure for the writing, dissemination and storage of texts. How can we use this ecological perspective to go beyond the now stereotypical 'religion' and 'politics' problematic?
- (6) *Renewed attention to diverse monastic ordination traditions* among Theravāda communities, including Buddhist monastic ordination traditions (both traditional male and contemporary female) as either temporary or permanent conditions. Temporary ordination enables easier transitions between the basic Buddhist social statuses of monk/nun and laity: what difference does the practice of temporary ordination make to Theravāda civilization(s)? How do we fit virtuoso monasticism (e.g. the traditions of hermit forest monks, or contemporary 'nuns' dedicated to a life of intensive meditation) into a revised view of Buddhist statuses and transitions between them?
- (7) *Resurgence of a religious engagement with the practice of 'magic' and the embodiment of spirits in mediums*, with particular attention to the role of women as mediums. 'Buddhism and the spirit cults' can no longer be seen as an 'archaic' feature of village Buddhism: it is alive and well in globalized cities such as Bangkok and elsewhere in modern Southeast Asia and features, *inter alia*, ancestor spirits, deceased heroes and court officers, as well as Kuan Yin, the Chinese goddess/bodhisattva whose popular cult is rapidly growing, or Ganesha, the 'Hindu' elephant-god of prosperity and material success. How can we re-think the relations between localized spirit veneration, Buddhist universalist ideology and male-dominated monasticism in contemporary Southeast Asia?
- (8) *The rise of vipassanā (Insight) meditation in the modern age*: Since the nineteenth century, the practice(s) of this form of meditation have become widely disseminated and popular among Buddhist lay people, not only in Asian Buddhist modernism(s), but also, and especially, in western Buddhism, and even in a wide range of western-scientific therapeutic practices. How should we assess this new role of meditation, in the context of secularization, globalization, modernity and the new middle classes, in Asia, transnational/diaspora communities and in western Buddhism and western/modern science?
- (9) *New books by members of the Theravāda Civilizations Project and course syllabi*: as a continuing part of most conferences, we envisage ongoing discussions of new books by participants as well as of syllabi and pedagogy, both in courses focused on Theravāda and also in courses where Theravāda is taught alongside other areas of Buddhism. There are a great number of ways to teach the 'Introduction to Buddhism' course: none can be 'comprehensive'—what criteria do/should we use in choosing how to present Buddhism in classes? How can recent trends

in research, such as the deconstruction of terms such as 'Buddhism' and 'Theravāda', be presented to students who have little or no previous exposure to them? How can we avoid the trap of setting up such 'sacred cows' only to disillusion students about them, leaving nothing in their place?

- (10) *Other topics* which have been suggested include Theravāda in film, the role(s) of Buddhist temples, contemporary Theravāda thinkers/writers and others. We do not conceive of this project as mandating a new list of priorities, but rather as opening up new venues for inquiry, in the light of past scholarship in the study of Theravada traditions and in the light of new insights (no pun intended) that are at the centre of debates in a number of related disciplines.

To date, we have a solid foundation of scholarship that addresses these concerns in specific locales, but few that seek to engage the Theravada imagination across a range of contexts. The agenda of the *Theravāda Civilizations Project* is to identify general trends through the comparisons of local cultural practices and historical developments. We anticipate that the project's comparative findings about modern transformations in Theravāda Buddhist civilizations will have implications for theories about the impact of modernity and globalization on religious and cultural civilizations *per se*. Such comparative and theoretical insights into modern formations of religious and cultural civilizations are particularly relevant in light of similar developments that have shaped Christian and Muslim civilizations in modern contexts.

Preparation

Not coincidentally, the principal investigators first discussed the need for a project of this kind at a conference funded by the Numata Foundation at the University of Toronto, that envisioned graduate training in Buddhist Studies at North American universities. Professors Collins and Schober approach this project through their respective scholarly trajectories in Buddhist literature, religious studies and anthropology. There is an intellectual history behind them as individuals, and to this project, at both the University of Chicago and Arizona State University.

At the University of Chicago and with support from the Ford Foundation in the 1950s, the anthropologists Robert Redfield and Milton Singer influentially approached Civilizational Studies under the rubric of 'Great' and 'Little' Traditions, attempting to bridge the study of historical-textual literate traditions in the Humanities with social-scientific studies of local, oral and written texts and practices. Their initiative led to the Undergraduate Civilizations sequences, which have been widely imitated, and to the establishment of the Committee on Southern Asian Studies which also supports work in Southeast Asia, among other regions. In the 1990s, Ford funded additional projects on globalization and on Area Studies/Regional Worlds that incorporated *inter alia* a post-Benedict Anderson focus on nationalism. Steven Collins participated in these projects and

co-wrote the report to the Ford Foundation, 'Regional Worlds'. He is the Chester D. Tripp Professor in the Humanities, and is the author of several monographs, including *Selfless persons: Imagery and thought in Theravāda Buddhism* (University of Cambridge Press, 1982), *Nirvana and other Buddhist felicities: Utopias of the Pali imaginaire* (University of Cambridge Press, 1998), *A Pali grammar for students* (Silkworm Press, 2006), *Nirvana: Concept, imagery, narrative* (University of Cambridge Press, 2010), and *Civilisation et femmes célibataires dans le bouddhisme en Asie du Sud et du Sud-Est* (Les Editions de CERF; Les Conférences de l'école pratique des hautes études 4, Paris 2011). His most recent project is concerned with Pali Practices of the Self (in light of the work of Michel Foucault and Pierre Hadot), which is the title of his Keynote Address to the Toronto meeting.

When Arizona State University developed its programmatic strength in Southeast Asia Studies during the 1990s, Professor Schober served as PI on two projects supported by the Henry Luce Foundation, to develop library holdings on Southeast Asia and to fund five doctoral dissertation projects on Southeast Asia in anthropology, religious studies and political science, respectively. She received grants from NEH, Ford, and Title VI funds in support of a National Resource Center for Southeast Asia at ASU. Trained as a cultural anthropologist, she has conducted ethnographic research and published widely on various aspects of Theravāda Buddhist practice, politics and ritual (*Sacred biography in the Buddhist traditions of South and Southeast Asia*, ed., 1997; *Modern Buddhist conjunctures in Myanmar*, University of Hawai'i Press, 2011). She has served on committees of the AAS, SSRC and ACSL and, at present, is Director of Graduate Studies in Religion at ASU.

Participants are listed Appendix 2. All are trained in one or more Buddhist languages, such as Pali, Sanskrit, and national or vernacular languages such as Burmese, Sinhala, Thai, Khmer, Lao, Shan, Chinese, Nepalese and Newari.

Graduate student/recent PhD workshops

Through funding from the Henry Luce Foundation, the format of past conferences will be augmented by the addition of a workshop that aims to bring into conversation current dissertation projects and their recent revisions for publication. These workshops are intended to bring together doctoral students and post-doctoral academics in the humanities and social sciences who engage some aspects of Theravāda classical and/or vernacular literature and/or research aspects of Theravāda history and cultural practice among Southeast Asian communities and the diaspora. Participants will be (1) developing dissertation proposals; or (2) in early phases of research and dissertation writing; or (3) revising recent dissertations for publication. The workshops will involve around 6–8 doctoral students and/or post doctoral academics, ideally from a broad array of disciplines and working on a wide variety of materials in a variety of time periods on themes related to Theravāda traditions and communities in Southeast Asia. Attended by some members of the faculty group, each workshop will provide a

day of intense discussion, presentation, and close review of dissertation proposals, outlines, and completed or near-completed manuscripts.

Outcomes, dissemination and vision beyond award period

An agenda for a possible second phase of this project after 2014 is being considered in order to continue the benefits of academic revitalization in the field. In phase two, we envision more conferences with both faculty and junior scholars at the dissertation and post-doctoral stages; a 2–3 weeks long, National Endowment for the Humanities-style summer seminar for college teachers which may be repeated in future years. In its entirety, the project promises to shape the formation of a new generation of scholars at a critical moment in the public support for research in the humanities.

In conclusion, we wish to emphasize that the *Theravada Civilizations Project* is merely a venue that seeks to chart new beginnings by asking new questions of our research materials. It is not a project that can be accomplished by a few individuals and instead will involve the active participation of a community of scholars. Nor do we conceive of it as a finite undertaking. We hope to involve a growing number of our colleagues in these conversations over the coming years. In addition to conferences, workshops and publications, we will employ digital resources to share teaching and resource materials, bibliographic resources, audio-visual materials, and what will hopefully emerge as a lively exchange of ideas and refreshing discussions facilitated through the project website and other future venues. As we move forward with this undertaking, we hope to hear from many of you about your work. Stay tuned.

NOTES

1. Anderson (1991). Anderson writes: 'Few things are more impressive than the vast territorial stretch of the Ummah Islam from Morocco to the Sulu archipelago, of Christendom from Paraguay to Japan, of the Buddhist World from Sri Lanka to the Korean peninsula. The great sacral cultures... incorporated conceptions of immense communities... [and] were imaginable largely through the medium of a sacred language and a written script... All the great classical communities conceived of themselves as cosmically central, through the medium of a sacred language linked to a superterrestrial order of power. Accordingly, the stretch of written Latin, Pali, Arabic or Chinese was, in theory, unlimited. (In fact, the deader the written language – the farther it was from speech – the better: in principle everyone has access to a pure world of signs).' (1991, 12–3) Inspiring and rightly influential as Anderson's work has been, everything said about Pali here is either simply wrong or in need of serious qualification—one of the things we hope the Project will do.
2. Skilling (2009, 80); cp. Skilling et al. (2012). In this volume Todd LeRoy Perreira, 'Whence Theravada? The modern genealogy of an ancient term', pp. 443–571, deals with the modern history of the word.

3. In the Chicago 2010 meeting we discussed, as we shall continue to discuss, the provocative and thought-provoking work of James Scott (1998, 2009) (see, for example, Scott, 2009, chap. 6¹/₂, 'Orality, Writing, and Texts').

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Juliane Schober is an anthropologist of religion whose recent book is titled *Modern Buddhist conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural narratives, colonial legacies and civil society* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2011). Her previous work focuses on Buddhist sacred biography and icons. She is Professor of Religious Studies and Director of the Center for Asian Research at Arizona State University.
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Steven Collins, is Chester D. Tripp Professor in the Humanities at the University of Chicago. He works on Pali texts and on Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia. His most recent work is *Civilisation et femmes célibataires dans le bouddhisme en Asie du Sud et du Sud-Est: Une étude de 'genre'* (Paris: Les Conférences de l'École pratique des hautes études, No. 5, 2011).
 Address: Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago, Foster Hall, 1130 E. 59th Street, Chicago, IL 60637, USA. Email: s-collins@uchicago.edu

Appendix 1

Conference programmes

1. Programme for conference at Arizona State University, February 2009

Day One:

Session 1: Theravāda as a construct during the nineteenth to twentieth centuries I

Session 2: Theravāda as a construct during the nineteenth to twentieth centuries II

Session 3: Local cultures, vernaculars and Pali traditions in colonial modernity I

Session 4: Local cultures, vernaculars and Pali traditions in colonial modernity II

Day Two:

Session 5: Theravāda Buddhist practices and writings now I

Session 6: Theravāda Buddhist practices and writings now II

Session 7: Summation: Concluding remarks and general discussion

Session 8: Charting future directions

2. Programme for conference at University of Chicago, September 2010

Day One:

Session 1: Discussion of new books by group members J. McDaniel and J. Schober

Session 2: Buddhist (and other) ethnicities 1—cultural and political aspects.

Session 3: Buddhist (and other) ethnicities 2—missionizing and the idea of 'conversion'.

Session 4: Public lecture by Kate Crosby, 'Theravāda as a developing worldview: The implications of yogāvacara for discarding the static model'.

Day Two:

Session 5: Civilization and the rhetoric of 'the field' I: re-assessing the Weberian legacy

Session 6: Civilization and the rhetoric of 'the field' II: Theravāda and other religions in SE Asia

Session 7: Teaching the Buddhism 101 course

Session 8: Discussion of grant initiatives and organizational development

3. Programme for conference at University of Toronto, March 2012

Day One:

Session 1: Marcel Mauss's *The gift* and the Buddhist perfection of generosity

Session 2: Generosity in the negotiation of social hierarchy and the construction of communities

Session 3: The gift as sacrifice: From renunciation and monasticism to temporary ordinations and leaving the saṅgha

Session 4: The Vessantara Jātaka and mythic extremes of Perfect Generosity

Day Two:

Session 5: Exchange, mediums and the status of spirits

Session 6: Practical uses of *Abhidhamma* philosophy and psychology

Session 7: Transformations, temporary ordinations, disrobing and the life cycle

Session 8: Summation and next steps

Appendix 2

List of participants

Steven Berkwitz, Professor of Religious Studies, Missouri State University, USA

Anne Blackburn, Professor of South Asia Studies & Buddhist Studies, Cornell University, USA

Thomas Borchert, Assistant Professor of Religion, University of Vermont, USA

Steven Collins, Chester D. Tripp Professor in the Humanities, University of Chicago, USA

Kate Crosby, Seiyo Kiriya Reader in Buddhist Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, UK

Christoph Emmrich, Assistant Professor in the Study of Religion, University of Toronto at Mississauga, Canada

Charles Hallisey, Yehan Numata Senior Lecturer on Buddhist Literatures, Divinity School, Harvard University, USA

Anne Hansen, Associate Professor of Languages and Culture of Asia, University of Wisconsin at Madison, USA

Charles Keyes, Emeritus Professor of Anthropology, University of Washington, USA

Justin McDaniel, Associate Professor of Religious Studies, University of Pennsylvania, USA

Patrick Pranke, Assistant Professor in the Department of Humanities, University of Louisville, USA

Juliane Schober, Professor of Religious Studies, Arizona State University, USA

Donald Swearer, Emeritus Professor, formerly Distinguished Visiting Professor of Buddhist Studies and Director of the Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University, USA

The following scholars have accepted our invitation to the conference at Toronto 2012:

Louis Gabaude, Emeritus, École française d'Extrême-Orient (Chiang Mai, Thailand)

John Holt, William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of the Humanities in Religion and Asian Studies, Bowdoin College, USA

Jacques Leider, École française d'Extrême-Orient (Chiang Mai, Thailand)

Ashley Thompson, Lecturer in the School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies, University of Leeds, UK