

## **Buddhism Without Merit: Theorizing Buddhist Religio-Economic Activity in the Contemporary World**

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Merit is the fundamental product of the Buddhist system. Buddhists generate and distribute it through their activities, and merit economics have shaped Buddhist practices, organizations, material culture, and inter-personal relations. But what happens when merit ceases to be recognized as a valuable product? For the first time in Buddhist history, some Buddhists are operating entirely outside of the merit economy, with resulting changes in organization, ritual practice, and economic activities. When merit is devalued, it is replaced by elements from culturally dominant non-merit economies and may take on their associated values and practices. Jettisoning the Buddhist merit economy has financial consequences for Buddhist groups, and those who operate without the merit economy must create new post-merit Buddhisms. A sifting process occurs, as practices, ideas, and institutions that are dependent on merit economic logic are altered or abandoned. Successful forms of Buddhism will be those that can be recast with non-merit logic.

### **Preamble: Half-Baked Buddhology**

In May 2017, a small group of scholars working on Buddhism and economics were invited by Drs. Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg and Trine Brox of the Centre for Contemporary Buddhist Studies in Copenhagen to gather for a special workshop. We were encouraged *not* to bring fully fleshed out, completed case studies. Rather, the organizers asked us to focus on how to theorize the study of Buddhism and economics, especially in the contemporary period. To this end, they explicitly invited us to be brave and come to the table with “unfinished work,” “vague ideas,” and “half-developed theories”—to gather not as experts but as eager pioneers in the spirit of “play.”

As we will see shortly, I amply fulfilled that mandate, and am still working on the research model that I wish to apply in more systematically testing the vague ideas and half-developed theories that follow. Such framing seems important and responsible to me: for my subfield of Buddhism beyond Asia, there is remarkably little sustained research on how Buddhist activities, institutions, and persons are funded, how different paradigms of economic models influence Buddhism in places

like Canada and the United States, and how changing beliefs and practices affect the financial fortunes of their associated lineages and practitioners. We need permission to take hesitant steps, to propose ideas ahead of our full data collection, and to offer forms of analysis that can be tested by various researchers in their case studies in order to determine their utility and how they need further modification. To that end, this paper builds on approximately twenty-five years of observation and interaction with a wide range of contemporary Buddhist organizations and phenomena, particularly in Canada, the United States, and Japan, but is not yet grounded in a single, long-term site or research area (unlike my previous major projects). Encouraged by Williams-Oerberg, Brox, and my other fellow participants in our network, I am in the initial stages of assembling a book-length, research-based investigation of the ideas I propose here. But before that necessary work occurs, let's have some fun.

### **Good and Bad Times in North American Buddhism: A Brief Look at How Some Groups are Faring**

Southern Ontario's Cham Shan Temple is growing, again. It is already one of the physically largest Buddhist networks in Canada, with ten sizable temples and Buddhist educational sites in the Toronto area and an imposing Buddhist museum/pagoda in Niagara Falls, nestled among the scenery and tourist traps. It also boasts a large number of full-time monastics, high attendance at its services, and wide influence in the booming Chinese-based stream of Canadian Buddhism. Now, it is adding a veritable Buddhist Disneyland to its properties: an ambitious plan is underway to build four pilgrimage sites on 1350 acres of land, with temples, eating facilities, and replication of the four holy Buddhist mountains of China. All signs point to the likely fulfilment of this dream.

Four thousand kilometers away things are not going quite so well at Zenwest, out on Victoria Island in British Columbia. They have created an impressive international network of practitioners, partly through the use of new online methods for delivering teaching and building community. But after thirteen years of sustained effort, they had to fire their abbot. The problem was not any failure or indiscretion on his part: the problem was cost. Their rented spaces, the activities they hold, the online communications, and the work involved in sustaining all of these cost money, and they can no longer afford to pay the abbot's salary. They have phased him out as a paid employee, which has forced him to get a part-time job to support his family. Naturally, this means he is no longer available in the same way to do the many administrative and other managerial tasks involved in running a religious organization—and this will show, in decreased activities and less time to attend to the needs of students and participants.

These snapshots suggest a diverse material and financial landscape in North American Buddhism. Wealth is not evenly distributed, and its relative presence or lack affects the ability of organizations and individual Buddhists to carry out their activities. Few Buddhists would state that they decided to pursue the Dharma for purely monetary gain—but the brutal truth is that if they do not manage to acquire significant ongoing funding for their cherished organizations, they will

experience diminished ability to provide the activities they wish to promote, or will close down altogether.

Of course, Buddhist activities have *always* been costly. Monks and nuns need to eat, meditation and worship halls can not build themselves, and statues, scrolls, books, paintings, beads, and robes do not grow on trees. Buddhists in various parts of Asia had to find sources of economic support, lest they face deprivation and eventual ruin. By definition, the lineages that have survived up to the modern day are those that successfully established sufficient funding for their needs.

### **Buddhist Economic Relations: The Merit Model**

So, how precisely did they do so? A great many avenues were taken to secure income and prosperity by various Buddhist communities in different times and places. Yet we can note that one model developed in the very early stages of Buddhism, persisted in nearly all subsequent Buddhist communities, and served as the primary organizing principle for the majority of Buddhist economic activity. Indeed, so widespread, fundamental, and mainstream was this model that we may call it *the* classical formula of Buddhist economic relations, representing a system indigenous to the Buddhist tradition to such an extent that it forms its own fully developed internal mode of Buddhist economics. This model is the separate but intimately intertwined division of economic and spiritual labor between the monastic sangha and the community of lay patrons, adherents, and participants. The force that drives this model is merit (Sanskrit: *punya*, Pali: *puñña*, Chinese: 功德, *gōng dé*, Japanese: *kudoku*)—therefore, we may refer to this historic Buddhist system as the merit economy.

Briefly stated, monks and nuns were recruited into a guild of religious specialists, who eschewed ordinary economic activities (whatever they might be for any particular society in question). These monastics symbolically (and sometimes actually) lived a life of renunciation. Meanwhile, non-monastics provided the economic means whereby the monastic community was able to exist and deliver the religious services the laity desired. Such support had many motivations, including respect and devotion, the wish to see the Buddha's teachings spread and benefit other beings, social pressure to conform to expected lay models of generosity, even legal requirement. But above all, the motivation was to share in the store of merit produced by monastic activities (Findly 2003).

Merit can be conceived as a non-tangible product of behavior. When an actor performs an action that is coded as good by a Buddhist tradition, this action produces some degree of merit; actions that are coded as bad produce demerit. The amount of merit or demerit produced is dependent on a complex set of factors, including the actor's intentions and purity, adherence to correct ritual procedure, whom the activity is directed toward, and so on. Merit influences the actor's future experience, whether a moment later or in a distant lifetime, in a manner that is opaque to the unawakened consciousness but is believed to be natural, logical, and inexorable. Do good deeds that produce merit, and at some point the resulting merit will lead to good experiences, such as rebirth in a higher form, wealth, exposure to the Buddhist teachings, the love and devotion of one's family, and so on. Do bad deeds and your demerit will lead to suffering, such as rebirth in the hell realms, loss of business or status, violence, sickness, etc (Osto 2016).

Merit is most easily and successfully produced by monastics. They are enjoined to follow codes of behavior that prevent accumulation of demerit and encourage cultivation of merit—furthermore, most Buddhist societies have believed that the act of undertaking ordination effects an ontological change, so that the resulting monk or nun is different from and holier than their previous existence as a layperson. Monastics engage in advanced activities that are all believed to be mighty engines of merit production: meditation, scriptural chanting, use of spells (mantras, dharani, parittta), elaborate devotional services, teaching the Dharma to others, and more (Lewis 2016). Indeed, this is their primary role as monastics. It is often erroneously stated that monks and nuns do not work. But they are better conceived as a specialized class of workers within Buddhist society who create and disseminate a specific, highly valuable product: merit. Their work to produce this merit can therefore be termed merit labor, and it is the chief commodity of the merit economy.

Laypeople may produce merit, but have a dramatically reduced capacity to do so, since they necessarily live lives that force them into demeritorious actions, and they lack the time, training, and circumstances to perform the most meritorious Buddhist practices. They therefore rely primarily on the monastic sangha to perform merit labor on their behalf (Prebish 2016). Importantly, after merit is produced, it can be redistributed. It thus acts as a type of currency within the Buddhist merit economy, which buys one rebirth in the heavenly realms (or a get-out-of-hell pass), physical beauty and health, wealth and mundane happiness, and, ultimately, nirvana or Buddhahood (since it directly paves the way for one to encounter, pursue, and complete the Buddhist path). This merit is the most valuable possible currency, far more valuable than mere money, which, unlike merit, cannot literally buy you love or happiness and, unlike merit, you can not take it with you when you die.

Laypeople access the fruits of monastic merit labor by donating money and goods to the monks and nuns and their representative organizations, who then dedicate their stores of merit to the donor or their designated recipient (such as the donor's deceased ancestors). From one point of view we might say that the laypeople buy it from the monastic sangha, in an economic exchange that is spoken of as *dana* (generosity). Monastics are called a field of merit: the purity and ritual expertise of the monks and nuns are the fertile ground in which the laity sow seeds of *dana* to acquire a crop of merit. Although I speak of it as a currency, we should be cautious about considering it a fully rational one: giving merit away actually increases it (since this is a meritorious act of generosity) and giving reaps greater rewards for the same donation depending on the status of the recipient. Thus monks, as the purest and most spiritually adept persons, are the supreme field of merit, and those who project the greatest aura of holiness receive the greatest clamoring to accept donations from the laity. Ironically, renunciation, intense meditation, and retreat from the secular world often make a monk all the holier in the eyes of the community and thereby magnify the crush of donations thrust upon him (Jackson 1999). Likewise, monks who can represent themselves as incarnations of sacred figures, such as Tibetan and Mongolian tulkus who are reincarnations of past saints or even cosmic bodhisattvas, can command greater donations than ordinary monastics.

The laity rely on the monastic sangha for merit, while the monks and nuns rely on the laity to provide the material and financial necessities of life. We can therefore say that for the monastic sangha, the laity represent a field of *dana*, which they cultivate by planting ideas of merit, karma,

rebirth, the threat of hell, and representations of their own purity and ritual efficacy. They use merit as the currency to buy food, robes, monasteries, golden statues, and other desired products that they have diminished capacity to produce due to their professional circumstances. This exchange—money for merit, or material support of the monastics for the fulfillment of one's wishes—is the foundational basis of the merit economy, and indeed of Buddhism itself, historically speaking.

### **Buddhist Missionary Work: Marketing the Merit Economy**

As Buddhists spread their ideas and practices through Asia, they did so in relation to the merit economy. Establishment of the merit economy in new societies was the key factor in allowing Buddhism to take root and thrive, delivering all the benefits (and possible drawbacks) of Buddhist thought and culture. It is often said “No Buddhism without the sangha,” (Carrithers 1984) to which we might add that this basically amounts to “No Buddhism without the merit economy, the essential lifeblood of the monastic sangha.”

In reality, Buddhist monks and nuns usually performed some degree of regular labor, and provided services such as tutoring, practicing medicine and divination, and so on. Monasteries received funding from significant land grants, the labor of monastery slaves and serfs, the brisk trade in amulets and other magical devices, management of mills and pawnshops, high-interest bank loans, the sale of rice, alcohol, tea, paper, ink, silk, and other products produced on monastery-owned lands, and further sources (Gernet 1995; Walsh 2010; Reader and Tanabe 1998; Kitiarsa 2012). Nonetheless, the trade in merit was always the central source of income, especially if we note how the logic of the merit economy underlay most of these alternate activities: land and slaves were given in order to generate merit for the donor, lucky charms and other devices worked because they were infused with the meritorious power of the pure monks who produced them, loans were produced from the capital donated as *dana*, etc. Buying mundane products from a monastery rather than identical ones from a secular merchant carried the implication that one's purchase funded the Dharma in some fashion, and therefore produced merit. Buddhist sellers thus enjoyed an inherent marketing advantage over their competitors in societies infused with the merit economy. Monasteries also typically had some degree of exemption from taxation as well. No wonder then that they often acquired great wealth.

One of the first challenges that missionaries and devotees encountered when bringing Buddhism into a new cultural area was the necessity to confront and transform the pre-existing economy. Non-Buddhist cultures operated with their own economies, which were not merit-based, or, at least, not based in Buddhist notions of merit economy. We may term these other models to be non-merit economies: a non-merit economy is any system of exchange that does not operate in relation to Buddhist concepts of merit. Such economies may be feudal, capitalist, Communist, or other forms of economic arrangement. Buddhists could only thrive in situations where they were able to sell merit and thereby lay the economic foundations of the Buddhist merit economy. Thus the transformation of non-merit economies into merit economies was a primary concern.

We can see the process of promoting merit and convincing new buyers of its effectiveness in the transmission of Buddhism to many historical cultures. Buddhism's success in China, for example, was aided by the introduction of scriptures that extolled the benefits of making merit. One of the first

such texts noted in Chinese history, the Sutra in Forty-two Sections, taught readers to make merit by offering food to monks (Sharf 1996a). A later but still early text, the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra for Humane Kings Who Wish to Benefit Their States, dramatically upped the stakes by promising that rulers who materially supported Buddhism would be protected from disasters and revolts (Orzech 1996). When Buddhism was brought to Japan from Korea, it was with the promise that worship of this foreign god would bring benefits to the royal court, a clear first step in the establishment of the merit economy. Similar dynamics played out across Asia.

Through the encounter of Buddhism and new cultures, non-merit economies were transformed into quasi- or full merit economies. By quasi-merit economy, I mean one that operates partially with reference to merit economic logic, but also preserves significant alternate logics as well—whereas a full merit economy is one that has been truly captured by the logic of the Buddhist merit economy system. Of course, such transformations are hardly one-sided: as Buddhism altered local economies along merit lines it was itself influenced by the new cultures in which it was practiced, producing new forms of meritorious activity, new patterns of production and consumption, and new interpretations that partially remolded Buddhism in the image of its host cultures.

### **Tiles and Piggy Banks: Merit as Fundraising Enticement in North America**

Merit is one of the most successful Buddhist ideas in the long history of the religion. By comparison some allegedly core principles, such as no-self, are ignored or poorly understood by significant swathes of the Buddhist population. Furthermore, merit accumulation was the one practice that united all Buddhists, monastic and lay, as all Buddhists engaged in activities designed to gain merit—unlike the far less even distribution of other practices, such as sutra recitation, meditation, doctrinal study, and precepts (Reader and Tanabe 1998). There has never been a historic Buddhist culture or subculture that operated without reference to merit, and in almost all cases never one without the merit economy at its center.

Let us return to the first of our two brief examples that we encountered earlier. Cham Shan is wealthy and prosperous, with significant land holdings and buildings on several sites, impressive monuments and statues, a sizable monastic sangha, and the participation of many laypeople. They are now building several even bigger, more ambitious pilgrimage parks. How are they able to fund all of this?

The first park to be worked on is Wutai Shan Garden Park in Canada. Each of the various attractions at the park is compartmentalized into a discrete unit that can be promoted with specific sales pitches. Bilingual advertisements for each of these appear throughout the Cham Shan temples and are prominent on the temple's website. The key term in these advertisements is merit (功德, *gōng dé*). For example, the Manjusri Hall at Wutai Shan is funded through sales of adornments, whose purchase brings merit and the many benefits derived from merit. Those who contribute will make boundless merit (造像功德, *zào xiàng gōng dé*), and receive health, prosperity, academic achievement,

and wisdom via that meritorious act (Cham Shan, c).<sup>1</sup> Specifically, patrons may choose among a variety of items to donate, such as bronze roof shingles (\$100), lanterns (\$200), or carved buddha statuettes (\$600). Note that they are not technically buying these items, as they are not physically given to the buyers. Rather, they are placed on-site at the Manjusri Hall to add to its luster and holiness. Donors' names are inscribed on the items, and since they are placed in the hall, they will continuously receive merit from their personal association with this sacred site. This fundraising strategy of inscribing donors' names on adornments for Buddhist sacred sites goes back at least to the second century BCE (Schopen 1997).

Paying for the gilding of golden statues at Wutai Shan Garden Park in Canada is another avenue for making merit (and fundraising for the temple). As a temple advertisement states:

[The] Causality of Past-Present-Future Sutra says, "What causes one [to be reborn] in high position [in] this life? Gilding the Buddha statue in one's past life is the cause. One reaps what one sows. Gilding a Buddha statue is gilding the self. What adorns the Buddha adorns the self." To cover the Buddha statue with gold sheets is to enhance the status of the Buddha and to bring forth a sense of respect and purity in the viewer. Gilding statues is a meritorious deed to accrue merit and virtue in one's cultivation, which brings blessing to one's parents and career. The merit gained is inconceivable as it brings fortune in this life and helps in future liberation" (Cham Shan, b).<sup>2</sup>

This pitch is followed by directions for the reader to scan the Cham Shan WeChat (a major Chinese social media tool) QR code at the bottom of the page so that they can make a donation via their smartphone. Doing so results in the eradication of light offences and the lightening of major ones, provides protection from ghosts, poisonous snakes, hungry tigers, plague, flood, fire, robbery, war, and imprisonment, assures the donor of freedom from suffering, vengeance, and retribution, results in wealth, harmony, longevity, peace, health, affection, and respect, and causes the donor to be forever reborn in good realms with physical beauty, intelligence, and luck, as well as the ability to help oneself, relatives, and all beings toward buddhahood. Categories of gilding include \$20, \$50, \$80, \$200, \$500, \$1000, and \$5000 (\$500 and up will get you your name engraved on the statue you help gild).

Yet another advertisement informs the reader that "Paving roads is to accumulate good fortune. Roads are the paths toward one's destinations. When you help paving a road for others, your good acts will bring you a perfect and fulfilled life in return. The merits of paving a road for others in this life will ensure that in future you will be helped by others, even miraculously, when you need a hand" (Cham Shan, a).<sup>3</sup> Therefore, donors should help pay for the construction of roads and paths at Wutai Shan Garden Park in Canada. "Now is the opportunity for everyone to accumulate good fortune, cultivate wisdom and pave one's life path. Please do not miss out on this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to generate unfathomable merits. Merits of constructing Wutai Shan will last for tens of

<sup>1</sup> This is a promotional flyer, collected on site at Ten Thousand Buddhas Sariri Stupa, November 14, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> This is a promotional flyer, collected on site at Ten Thousand Buddhas Sariri Stupa, November 14, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> This is a promotional flyer, collected on site at Ten Thousand Buddhas Sariri Stupa, November 14, 2017.

thousands of years” (Cham Shan, a). The cost is \$5000 per meter, which can be paid for individually or in groups up to five. Donors’ names will be inscribed on the path.

For those who can’t afford to buy a place for their names on some specific piece of the park, there are other ways to make donations (and merit). For instance, one program distributed piggy banks to interested temple attendees, who were encouraged to take them home and put in a donation of whatever spare change they had each day. These piggy banks are to be returned on Mañjuśrī’s birthday (Mañjuśrī is the tutelary deity of Wutai Shan in China), with the promise that such donations will “produce numerous merits and blessings” (Cham Shan Temple 2017).

The temple seeks to raise \$80 million for the construction of Wutai Shan Garden Park in Canada, one of the most ambitious building plans ever undertaken in Buddhist North America. Thus it must exploit every possible avenue of fundraising. These methods have been effective in the past, as a stroll around the grounds of the Ten Thousand Buddhas Sarira Stupa indicates.<sup>4</sup> This Cham Shan property at Niagara Falls boasts a seven-story stupa with a seven-ton buddha statue, a museum of Buddhist artefacts, and relics of the Buddha. Opposite the large main gate is a towering statue of Guanyin Bodhisattva, ensconced in a wide palace adorned with full-size statues of the eighteen arhats. The accompanying plaque indicates that it was donated by a devout laywoman in order to dedicate merit to her deceased father and guard the Buddhist assembly. A speaker hidden in a nearby flowerpot continuously plays a recitation of a Mahayana sutra extolling the merits that are gained by protecting and supporting Buddhism. Visitors and devotees can also wander the grounds to offer respect to dozens of statues of all sizes, including larger-than-life images of the bodhisattvas Mañjuśrī, Samantabhadra, and Kṣitigarbha. Another building provides a large worship space, educational materials, and monastic quarters. Here visitors can pay \$1 for a bottle of water blessed by the monks and nuns, \$5 for a package of incense to offer before the altar, or \$38 to buy a wishing plaque on which to inscribe their prayers to the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and protector gods. The parking lots alone are larger than many spaces that Buddhist groups in North America inhabit.

### **Downwardly Mobile Buddhism**

Buddhists in the United States on average earn less than the general American population at large, according to a 2014 Pew survey of household income: 36% earn under \$30,000 (U.S. average: 35%), 18% earn \$30,000-\$49,000 (U.S. average: 20%), 32% earn \$50,000-\$99,999 (U.S. average: 26%), and only 13% earn \$100,000 or more (U.S. average: 19%). This puts them well behind Jews, Hindus, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, atheists, Methodists, and many others—in terms of income, Buddhists’ closest compatriots are Southern Baptists, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Pentecostals (Masci 2016). However, this does not mean that Buddhists as a whole lack significant financial resources, and some lineages draw especially on members of the information, technology, and other privileged sectors of contemporary society. Similar dynamics appear to exist in Canada.

Cham Shan is hardly the only wealthy Buddhist organization with significant land and property in North America. But its financial success is more the exception than the rule when it comes to

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<sup>4</sup> The following description is based on site visits in July 2012, July 2014, August 2017, and November 2017.



Buddhist temples and meditation groups. In fact, in many cases it is those groups that draw members from the relatively wealthy and enfranchised classes that are precisely the ones facing the greatest financial difficulties. A significant factor in this impoverishment of such Buddhist groups is their failure to promote merit and establish functioning merit economies.

To examine this, we turn again to Zenwest, who recently had to fire their head teacher, Eshu Martin, in a downsizing operation. In 2004 they adopted a model that was supposed to provide full-time employment for Martin and ensure that the group maintain appropriate practice spaces (Zenwest 2017). Income came from tiered memberships: basic membership was cheaper (\$948 per year, in 2017) but required additional payments to participate in activities other than general meditation sessions, while full membership was more expensive (\$2148 per year, in 2017) and provided access to all activities without additional charge. Exceptions were also made for those who could not pay at either of these levels, but earnestly wished to practice Zen with the community. A further category of associate (\$120 per year, in 2017) provided some basic access to Zenwest functions, without the stability or privileges of either category of membership.

Membership fees alone couldn't cover basic operating costs, let alone allow for growth in the organization and spread of the Buddhist teachings (Zenwest 2017). Therefore, quarterly fundraising drives were also initiated, with the understanding that everyone (including those already at full membership) should donate as much as possible. And significant volunteer labor was also needed to operate the temple organization and deliver its religious and educational activities, many of which took place in the online environment via videos and podcasts.

For a while, membership grew and thus more income came in, but as stated, membership fees were not designed to cover all costs—and more members meant greater costs. Quarterly donations and volunteer work did not keep pace with need, in part because off-site virtual members had limited ability to contribute labor in the Victoria area. Membership growth eventually began to plateau. Going into crisis management mode, Zenwest began to scale back on activities (Zenwest 2017). This reduced costs but did not produce sufficient savings, and also affected income to a degree. Further cuts were needed, until by 2015 all programs and resources that could be eliminated from the budget had already been removed.

Thus it was clear that even more serious steps needed to be taken. Martin's position was reduced to 40% employment, and he was forced to secure a job at Victoria Hospice to support himself, his wife, and children, all of whom lived in the rented house/temple operated by Zenwest just outside Victoria (Zenwest 2017; Sweeping Zen 2014). With Martin no longer able to provide the same level of attention to outreach and individual members, tasks were shifted onto other members, who faced steep learning curves and in some cases began to experience overload. Membership growth and retention was negatively impacted, bringing even greater financial trouble.

In the end, it was unsustainable. In June 2017 the board and Martin announced that a year-long readjustment process would occur (Zenwest 2017). Starting in September, Martin's salary was eliminated (it was already at 40% full-time, down 60% from 2004–2015). In April 2018, the temple stopped paying for housing him and his family, and he ceased to be an employee of Zenwest. Without Martin available to provide the same degree of training and counseling to Zenwest students, further

reductions in membership and programming can be expected. The future is as of yet unwritten, but it does not appear to be rosy.

### **Buddhism with and without Merit**

In comparing Cham Shan and Zenwest, earlier paradigms of scholarship on Buddhism in the West would suggest certain features are most salient for analysis. A primary one is the groups' ethnic make-up: Cham Shan is heavily attended by Asian-Canadians, especially Chinese-Canadians, while Zenwest's membership is over 90% white.<sup>5</sup> Another is their respective practices: Cham Shan offers a very wide array of frequent activities, including chanting services, vegetarian lunches, meditation, scriptural study, precepts ceremonies, animal liberations, pilgrimages, and much more, while Zenwest focuses more narrowly on meditation (chiefly) and study (secondarily)—they do perform other rituals, but they are not part of the activities the temple actually promotes to the wider public.<sup>6</sup> A third common trope in earlier historiographical analysis is levels of participation: Cham Shan has a large number of full monks and nuns, many active devotees, and a large pool of visitors and occasional participants who just drop by; Zenwest has one central teacher with a further circle of helper priests (who typically have full-time secular jobs and live off-site), operates on a membership model, and produces media that are consumed by many people who have limited formal involvement with the organization.<sup>7</sup> A fourth mode of analysis would be to look at the groups' lineages: Cham Shan is a Tiantai organization, while Zenwest is affiliated with Rinzai Zen.<sup>8</sup>

All of these are useful to know, but I suggest that there is another factor that is worthy of investigation, indeed that may be more fundamentally important than any of the above demographic and organizational qualities, especially when trying to assess the causes behind their divergent financial situations and all the related phenomena that result: what really matters is whether or not each group participates in the Buddhist merit economy. Cham Shan, as illustrated, promotes and benefits from merit economics. Zenwest does not.

In all the discussion of fundraising and financial models, Zenwest does not suggest that donations to the temple will result in accumulated merit. In fact, they hardly provide any motivation at all. The short statement on the temple homepage (located at the bottom of the page, unlike Cham Shan's placement of donation buttons at the top) and donation subpage merely says:

Your donation helps Zenwest to continue to provide local practice offerings in the Zendo and the many services and supports that we offer around the world such as the Living Zen podcast, on-line courses and videos. You can make a difference by ensuring that we can continue to deliver our outstanding programming! Thank you for helping to make Zen come alive at Zenwest! (Zenwest, a).

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<sup>5</sup> This approach is suggested by, for example, Prebish 1999.

<sup>6</sup> This approach is suggested by, for example, Baumann 2002.

<sup>7</sup> This approach is suggested by, for example, Tweed 2002.

<sup>8</sup> This approach is suggested by, for example, Seager 1999.

In fact, the word merit is not used anywhere in Zenwest's online materials, including the last three years of archived newsletters. Even karma, a closely associated concept, appears only a single time, in a satirical poem.

Ironically, the donation page actually begins with a brief, uncited quote from the Buddha: "When a virtuous person to a virtuous person gives with a trusting heart a gift righteously obtained, placing faith that the fruit of action is great, that gift, I say, will come to full fruition" (ZenWest, b). This line, which comes from the *Dakkhiṇāvibhaṅga Sutta* (not a traditional Zen scripture) of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, is actually promoting generosity in order to generate merit in the original text. The Buddha says that gifts to spiritual adepts "repay incalculably, immeasurably" (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 1104). But as used by Zenwest, without any context and no explanation of terms, on a site completely devoid of merit logic, this quote appears to the reader as merely suggesting that giving will bring about the giver's intention, in this case to support Zenwest's activities. Without promotion of merit logic, at the very moment that Zenwest quotes a Buddhist scripture about how giving results in great meritorious rewards (the "fruits" of the original quote), it actually causes the quote to appear *not* to support the creation of merit or any other personal reward. They do not take advantage of opportunities to enlist the Buddhist merit economy in their survival, even opportunities they themselves create. This contrasts not only with Tiantai temples in North America such as Cham Shan, but with Rinzai Zen temples in Japan, which are hardly shy about employing merit logic to acquire income and status (Borup 2008: 36–42; Welter 2008).

Cham Shan motivates donors to give by linking them to concrete physical items they can see, touch, and inscribe their names on. They tell their donors that they will receive numerous practical and transcendent benefits from their monetary gifts, in this and in many future lives. Participation in Cham Shan temples has experienced a long, seemingly permanent ever-upwards trend as devotees and casual attendees are given ever more ways to practice and invest in their own and others' spiritual and material prosperity. The temple marshals an enormous amount and range of images, scriptures, relics, and teachings that fully immerse participants in its Buddhist lifeworld, showcase the purity and sincerity of their community, and proclaim a bright future for the Buddha's teaching in Canada, demonstrated in part by the material prosperity (an outward sign of internal devotion) of Cham Shan. Zenwest does none of these things. Cham Shan is rich, while Zenwest is poor. These are not unconnected facts.

### **Buddhism after Merit**

As the example of Zenwest demonstrates, some temples, meditation groups, and whole Buddhist networks in North America are operating without recourse to the normal Buddhist merit economy. They do not exist within a society that has already been successfully colonized by Buddhist merit logic, and they do little or nothing to create the conditions for such an economy to emerge, not even within their own membership. More than changes in ritual practice, racial composition, gender roles, rebirth concepts, level of social activism, or other possible phenomena, the jettisoning of the central, pervasive, and economically-crucial notion of merit is potentially the biggest and most significant transformation in certain Buddhist groups and networks that operate primarily outside of Asia. It is

a cleavage so momentous in its implications that it may someday appear in retrospect to be as major a paradigm shift as the rise of Mahayana in Indian Buddhism (although it is questionable whether it will ever attain a similar market share of the overall Buddhist community). And yet, it is a change that is largely unnoted, even by the very groups that are enacting it.

To theorize this new model of Buddhist practice and organization, I propose the term post-merit Buddhism. We may contrast this with merit Buddhisms, with the important caveat that what is now labeled merit Buddhism due to the late development of something called post-merit Buddhism is in fact what in all previous eras we would have simply labeled Buddhism. There were no Buddhisms that operated without relationship to the merit economy, no matter how significantly they might have modified it in their particular cases.

As post-merit Buddhism, such new forms exist downstream (historically-speaking) from the usual paradigms of Buddhist belief, practice, organization, and funding. They are not simply a natural evolution from within the trajectory of Buddhist history: they arise in the places where Buddhists have failed (by choice or circumstance) to establish merit economies, such as largely happened in North America since Buddhism's introduction in the nineteenth century. Significant numbers of Buddhist missionaries (Asian, European, and North American) from various Theravada, Zen, Tibetan, and other lineages propagated Buddhist philosophical concepts and individual practices without stressing the role of merit in Buddhism. This was due to a constellation of reasons, the complexity of which necessitates a separate treatment that I am also working on for later publication.<sup>9</sup>

For now, we can note that one important contributing factor was the perception by Americans, Canadians, and Europeans that merit was somehow superstitious, unscientific, or magical—all handicaps in an era characterized by faith in Christianity on the one hand, and in scientific empiricism on the other. Asian missionaries were anxious to escape colonial scripts that portrayed Asian Buddhists as degenerate and backwards; new Western practitioners were concerned to pursue only forms of spirituality that did not clash with their modernist and ethnic sensibilities. Some Asian teachers had ambiguous feelings about merit themselves, and those who didn't nonetheless sometimes de-emphasized merit-based teachings and practices when they felt that they would give unwanted impressions of Buddhism or simply saw that they fell on deaf ears outside Asia; the Western students, meanwhile, often edited the teachings they received, bracketing out those that did not resonate with them spiritually or intellectually, such as merit. This process was as much unconscious as deliberate: students simply paid more attention to teachings they found meaningful, and over time others were ignored until they were literally forgotten and largely passed out of the lexicon of some Buddhist groups.

But beliefs—those affirmed and those rejected—have very real economic effects. The devaluation of merit as a viable currency of exchange or product of labor results in sweeping transformations in nearly all other aspects of Buddhism. The task for those who, like me, wish to follow this line of inquiry is to tackle a number of fascinating questions that emerge. When Buddhists cease to recognize merit as a valuable product, what lifeworlds are then imagined by Buddhists? What

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<sup>9</sup> In the meantime, readers are directed to Snodgrass 2003, Lopez 2008, and McMahan 2008.

economic practices result? What ideas, images, forms of organization, and practices are retained in these new Buddhisms, and why? How are they re-understood? What new ideas, images, organizational models, and practices arise? And what new economic logics are resorted to by Buddhists who no longer practice within the usual merit economies?

I have some preliminary hypotheses to suggest. When merit is no longer operational within a Buddhist community, that group is likely to experience specific alterations in its models of funding, leadership, institutional organization, cosmology, and practice. These in turn will produce transformations in the understanding of Buddhist material and visual culture, ethics, and many further aspects of Buddhist religion and culture. And all of these will have economic effects, directly or indirectly. How Buddhist groups negotiate the seismic upheavals set off by the dropping of the merit economy largely determines whether they will achieve financial success or struggle perpetually with matters of funding. A sifting process will inevitably occur wherein practices, ideas, institutions, and so forth that cannot survive apart from merit economic logic will be minimalized, hidden, or abandoned. Successful forms of post-merit Buddhism and modes of practice will be those that can be recast with non-merit logic.

What are some of these effects? The dropping of the merit concept means that the traditional merit labor of monks and nuns ceases to have value, threatening their ability to cultivate the laity as a field of *dana*. Buddhist monastics are therefore reconceived as *experts*—somewhat along the lines of doctors, lawyers, professors, and other trained secular professionals—rather than merit producers. They are valuable because they have expertise in a body of knowledge (including how to meditate) which may be shared with non-experts, not because they are ontologically superior and produce karmic benefits for those who patronize them. Connected to this is a devaluation of monasticism in general—if celibacy and other monastic practices are no longer necessary to ensure the proper production of merit (since merit is not of interest anyway), and what truly matters is the body of knowledge that monks and nuns possess, then a resulting class of lay professionals can progressively displace the monastic sangha as the new, quicker-footed repositories of expertise and instruction. Such lay professionals may be nominally ordained but live in family-bound patterns essentially the same as other members of society (this is common in Zen lineages, for instance), or truly post-monastic, even post-Buddhist professionals who teach aspects of Buddhism from within a therapeutic framework (as often occurs within the mindfulness movement). Models that turn Buddhist practice sessions into fee-for-service events will become ever more common, and practitioners will be reconceived (consciously or otherwise) as potential customers and clients in a competitive marketplace. In reference to Richard Payne’s article elsewhere in this issue, this may have the effect of redirecting resources from “church Buddhism” toward “self-help Buddhism” and “denatured Buddhism”.

Traditionally, Buddhist statues and images are not inert objects and are not mere symbols of awakening or religious values. In premodern times and still much of the contemporary Buddhist world they were actually alive in some sense, imbued by specific “eye-opening” rituals with the spiritual force of the figures they represented (Sharf 1996b). They therefore served primarily as nodes of contact between the mundane and invisible spiritual worlds wherein devout petitioners could

receive merit in return for their worship. Buddhist scriptures functioned in a similar manner, and this merit logic of course was the primary driver in the creation of pilgrimage routes and erection of sacred sites (Diemberger 2012). It accorded status and authority to monasteries that possessed relics (always a strong source of merit). With merit evacuated from some Buddhist communities, the value of all of these phenomena is dramatically reduced, and their treatment becomes consequently less reverent. One of the most striking differences between many Buddhist groups in North America and their lineal counterparts in Asia is the relative diminution or absence of typical Buddhist visual and material culture. Some objects are reduced to art, while others become mere decoration, or are dispensed with entirely. Without the ability to endow amulets, charms, scrolls, statues, and other items with meritorious power, and in competition with Home Depot outlets that sell garden buddhas and Amazon's inexhaustible list of mass-produced Buddhist texts (not to mention the ubiquity of Buddhist images and teachings available online for free), Buddhist communities that do not traffic in merit lose a vital traditional source of funding.<sup>10</sup>

Without merit, karma has little real function. Without karma, the central concepts of rebirth and their attendant horizons of time and space collapse, orienting Buddhists to the present life alone. This necessitates dramatic reimagining of most elements of Buddhism. The reality of powerful buddhas, saints, and gods becomes suspect, and, worse yet, irrelevant. Threats of hellish rebirth evaporate, depriving Buddhists of a longstanding marketing tool for their services. Related ideas about gender—such as that rebirth in a woman's body is a karmic punishment and that women's defilements cause them to be reborn in a boiling pool of menstrual blood—become even more dubious than before (Williams 2005). This is good for equality but bad for business, as convincing women that donations to the sangha represented their only hope for a better (future) life was a lucrative form of fundraising in premodern Asia, indulged in by monks and nuns alike.

Practices that are mainly forms of merit labor, such as long periods of sutra chanting, will be dropped in favor of those that (while traditionally having elements of merit labor) can be repurposed with relative ease, such as silent meditation, which now offers a vision of self-improvement as its function. These formerly rare practices will become mainstream, perhaps dominant. The benefits of Buddhist practice will be reconceived as scientific, medical, and psychological in nature, rather than based in systems of invisible merit and posthumous existences, and traditional images and concepts (such as the Wheel of Life) will be turned into symbols and metaphors. Especially impacted will be end-of-life and memorial rituals, which in many Buddhist cultures are essential sources of income (Rowe 2011; Stone 2016; Davis 2016; Williams 2005). Without the need to manipulate merit at these moments of putative rebirth, such rituals will lose their urgency and laypeople will cease to pay for them. New sources of income, sometimes requiring significant investments of labor and capital, may become necessary—one example is the network of shops and publishing ventures established by the

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<sup>10</sup> As Trine Brox shows elsewhere in this issue, it is possible for mass-produced Buddhist commodities to still retain a sacred aura for certain consumers. But, crucially, such an aura is still dependent on worldviews that give credence to merit-related beliefs. When objects are both mass produced and fail to be contextualized in a merit cosmology, it is unlikely that they will be treated with a high degree of reverence; economically, this means that they will have reduced selling power.

Triratna Buddhist Community (based in the United Kingdom). Not coincidentally, their recently-deceased leader denied the reality of merit transference: “The doctrine of *pariṇāmanā* or transference of merit is not meant to assert that anything has literally been transferred from one person to another. It is to be understood in a more poetic sense; it concerns our inner attitude” (Sangharakshita 1995: 106). Such understandings, which diverge from historic Buddhism, close off access to the merit economy and thus require replacement methods of income.

The loss of merit substantially undermines the foundations of traditional Buddhist ethics as well, necessitating a major rebuild. One’s current life state is no longer explained by past behavior, and present morality is no longer a predictor of personal destiny. Fear and desire lose their effectiveness as motivators, and empathy and compassion achieve an even greater importance than before as key ethical values. Thus appeals to donors will play more on their feelings toward the Buddhist community, and highlight the good works of Buddhism in the world at large.

One last note: given their commitments to very particular, often reformist, visions of Buddhism, I hypothesize that post-merit Buddhisms will have a difficult time according equal value to merit Buddhisms, their communities, and their practices. They will also have difficulty understanding the Buddhist past, and will continually interpret Buddhist history in productively misinformed ways, often tinged by romanticism, that authorize their new practices and visions as actual inheritances from the tradition rather than significant innovations.

### **Conclusion: The Research Road Ahead**

These and many more are the likely outcomes of the rise of post-merit Buddhism. It is exciting stuff for a researcher. And we need to be careful too. As Cham Shan shows, the merit model is alive and well in parts of North American Buddhism, as it is elsewhere. Cham Shan shows that merit Buddhisms can continue to operate within non-merit economies such as that of the larger Canadian society. At least one way they do so is by doubling-down on the rhetoric of merit and aggressively cultivating local merit economies that sustain themselves by forming or drawing on Buddhist subcultures. With luck and ingenuity, it is likely that savvy Buddhists can exploit the opportunities that exist within merit and non-merit economies simultaneously. Something like this already exists within the Tibetan Buddhist world of America, where some lamas give merit-based teachings and perform merit-based practices in Tibetan for their Tibetan-American followers, while giving post-merit teachings and favoring post-merit practices in English for their non-Tibetan audiences (Mullen 2001).

So we need to study not only post-merit Buddhism, but also merit Buddhism operating in non-merit economies. These exist not only in the West, but anywhere that Buddhism finds itself in a new or non-dominant situation, such as in the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and Eastern Europe. They may also emerge in Asia when traditional merit logic begins to break down, such as through exposure to non-merit economies, scientific advances that cast doubt on merit-based cosmologies, and secularism. Furthermore, we need to be attentive to how some groups mix both merit and post-merit models—in many cases genuinely post-merit Buddhism will prove to be more of an imagined ideal type than an actual reality. After all, nearly all traditional elements of Buddhism were connected to the merit economy in some fashion. Even post-merit Zen groups in Canada still include ritual merit

dedications (despite in some cases not believing there is any merit to dedicate, nor any spirits to send it to) and chant the Heart Sutra, whose merit-generating efficacy and powerful closing mantra were key to its success in Buddhist history.

Finally, because they all retain elements of previous modes of merit Buddhism, post-merit Buddhisms may slide back into merit logic. Economic forces may be push factors that propel some groups in such a direction. Even when one does not necessarily believe in literal merit and karma, the classic Buddhist trope of *upāya* (situational tactics) allows practitioners to promote financially useful doctrines and practices with the justification that they are strategic adaptations and contribute to the ultimate good of Buddhism. Of course, merit is not the only avenue of investigation for analyzing how contemporary Buddhism is funded. But it is so rich a site for excavation that I anticipate it can substantially contribute to emerging theories of Buddhist economic activities in Asia and beyond.

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