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Introduction: Buddhism and Resilience

Nalika Gajaweera
University of Southern California

Darcie DeAngelo
Binghamton University

In recent years, the term resilience seems to be ubiquitous. People deploy the term in academic and political circles from fields as varied as ecology, mental health, human development, and humanitarianism. The term's broad conceptual spectrum verges on producing a floating signifier, but common patterns of its use also emerge. Overall, resilience as a concept indicates how well individuals, communities, and even ecosystems anticipate, adapt and recover—in other words, how much subjects "bounce back" from existential stress, trauma and/or violence.

Scholars and policymakers alike focus on particulars about the range of resilience. Where does the capacity for resilience stem from? Why do some people bounce back from adversity better than others? What rituals, practices, and techniques have human societies developed and drawn upon to respond to social suffering and do these affect resilience?

Buddhism has become a growing area of interest in relation to the psychological studies of resilience. Health practitioners, policy makers, and others implement interventions to promote resilience now tagged under the heading "mindfulness," another psychological remaking of Buddhism as a powerful modality for cultivating human resilience and the capacity to recover from loss and trauma. Although rooted in canonical Buddhist texts and traditions, mindfulness can now be seen in a wide range of non-religious contexts from university campuses, clinical settings and even state government. This adoption of a technique grounded in Buddhist religious practice connects Buddhist practice to resilience but also turns away from its original Buddhist soteriological goal of nirvana. Associating Buddhist mindfulness with resilience has been widely regarded as a particularly western modern reinterpretation of Buddhism (Samuel 2015; Sharf 2015; Wilson 2014; Gleig 2019).

Yet, across South and Southeast Asia, Buddhist practices, ideas, and institutions, often beyond mindfulness and meditation, have long been viewed as fundamental for dealing with existential distress, for responding to ethical questions of how ought one to live, cultivating resilience in locally situated ways (Aulino 2019; Desjarlais 2016).

This special issue brings together the work of anthropologists who explore local modes of resilience and how they are connected to Buddhist practice on the ground. The authors attend to the shifting meanings of Buddhist responses to suffering across time and space.

As the authors focus on local practice and concepts, they bring an anthropological sensitivity to how Buddhist ideologies, cosmologies, and discourses are grounded in concrete aspects of their social worlds, including class, race, gender relations and power dynamics, and the political economy of life in local contexts. Each paper pays careful attention to how individuals are circumscribed by their local context, appropriating and deploying practices selectively and strategically to respond to adversity, stress, and existential suffering. In this collection, we seek to situate approaches to Buddhism and resilience in order to avoid a narrow functionalist understanding of the relationship between the two.

Indeed, Buddhism—at least as classically understood—is not always the main frame of these ethnographies. Each paper depicts how different local actors deploy, contest and revise received Buddhist tradition in the context of stress. In the individual fieldsites, Buddhist interlocutors often choose to give prominence to different aspects of the inherently pluralistic Buddhist tradition, sometimes strategically selecting ideas for interpretation for their own ends. This is a process that offers manifold opportunities for creative revision and amendment; one that as anthropologist Nancy Eberhardt has suggested elsewhere (2006), shapes anthropological scholars' reticence to privilege doctrinal or canonical Buddhism over customary practice and local interpretation.

The category of "canon" itself, meaning official writings and collected rules, comes from a tradition of religious scholarship that prioritizes doxographic scriptures over practice. It evokes ideas of authenticity and, in Buddhist studies in particular, the idea of canon is linked to ideas of "early Buddhism" (Collins 1990). Previous collections in the Journal of Global Buddhism have moved to counter these traditional priorities, namely the recent Special Focus *Bad Buddhism* explored how contemporary Buddhist practices "challenge normative interpretations, unsettle, or even disgust the observer, and appear to degrade or distract from so-called "authentic" or "pure" Buddhism" (Gould and McKay 2020). Similarly, the collection here orients the analysis to the field when it comes to Buddhism. While the authors attend to the contingencies of concepts and practices, they do not dismiss the written edicts of Buddhism, either. Indeed, a canon as standardized and immutable imposes too "clear [a] division" between lay practice and official teachings (Frieberger 2005) since texts themselves contradict and converse with each other. The authors of this collection put field data in conversations with canon, representing how interlocutors on the ground navigate laws, official teachings, and practices. This presents a frame of *concepts in motion,* emphasizing how practice interplays with concepts. Ultimately, fieldwork undermines the dichotomy between experts and laypeople.

Such an orientation to the field thus emphasizes attention to the historically situated conditions and the ongoing social, political, and cultural shifts of the fieldsite as formative to knowledge making practices of anthropologists. As the editors of this Special Focus and as anthropologists conducting field research in places where Buddhist traditions are only one among

many discursive traditions and practices that carry weight in everyday experiences, we have found that our knowledge production often entails approaching Buddhism obliquely, in the ways it emerges from the ground-up.

Both DeAngelo and Gajaweera, for instance, have found emic articulations of the Buddhist idea of interdependence and relationality intimately linked to the conditions that our interlocutors contend with in our vastly different fieldsites. In her work, Darcie DeAngelo found her Cambodian interlocutors' vernacular understandings of interdependence entangled with their everyday concerns and struggles with repairing post-war relations. Nalika Gajaweera examined the efforts of non-white practitioners of mindfulness in the United States creating "safe spaces" to collectively process painful emotions around racialized trauma. Here, too, she found her interlocutors giving expression to Buddhist notions of relationality through their lived social and political contexts of American race relations. In both instances, interlocutors evoked vernacular understandings of Buddhists tenets of interdependence in ways that enacted a communal sense of resilience, positing challenges to western assumptions of resilience that depend on the individual subject at the center. As the other contributors of this Special Focus find, an anthropological focus on vernacular Buddhist concepts and practices in the context of existential distress, suffering, and violence, suggest that resilience itself is an historically complex construct with a diversity of forms.

At the turn of the 21st century, anthropologist George Marcus and Michael Fischer argued in their seminal work "Anthropology as Cultural Critique" that the promise of modern anthropology is to offer "worthwhile and interesting critiques of our own society; to enlighten us about other human possibilities, engendering an awareness that we are merely one pattern among many; to make accessible the normally unexamined assumptions by which we operate and through which we encounter members of other cultures" (1999: ix). Indeed, Marcus later argues that anthropologists should follow concepts as contingent to space *and time* (Rabinow et al. 2008). This Special Focus collection follows suit by following concepts within Buddhism in space, on the ground, in local communities, and across time. With these commitments in mind, the contributors seek to undermine the presumed universalism of the concepts of mindfulness and resilience by showing how varied Buddhist practice is and has been when it comes to facing stress and suffering.

As a point of departure, this Special Issue begins with Jo Cook's examination of the current British parliamentary support for mindfulness awareness training in British public, private, and third sector, as well as the integration of mindfulness in policy discussions on psychological resilience in Britain. By delving in detail into the genealogy of mindfulness in Britain and its development since the 19th century, Cook unpacks the complex and interwoven connections and contingencies that led to the historical development of certain universalizing truth claims about Buddhism and psychology in Britain that now contribute to its immense popularity in governance. The contribution illustrates the ways in which seemingly antithetical intellectual currents of empiricism and enchantment informed the on-going dialogue between Buddhism and psychology in Britain.

Julia Cassaniti proposes an analytic from a multi-sited, comparative study of Buddhist practices. In it, she follows a question: how to compare and contrast such diverse sites connected by

the purported idea of "mindfulness"? What does it mean when Ellen Degeneres, an American talk show host, applauds the mindfulness of the Thai soccer team trapped in a cave? Cassaniti's starting point is then the translation of mindfulness from the Thai term *sati* and how both the talk show host and the Thai soccer team coach present mindfulness as connected to resilience. Her fieldwork yields a series of common concepts to compare mindfulness. through the ethnographic fieldwork in a wide range of places, from Thailand, California, and Sri Lanka. Temporality, Affect, Power, Ethics, and Selfhood (TAPES) emerged as varied but common themes in these practices. TAPES offers researchers a preliminary tool for how to conduct that comparison while simultaneously provocatively questioning presumptions of what mindfulness and resilience mean.

Likewise, Nalika Gajaweera unsettles the universalist assumptions of mindfulness as a tool for psychological resilience. Gajaweera shows how some non-white practitioners of meditation in the United States emphasize how mental freedom is deemed contingent upon uncovering the historical depth to the present (embodied) experience of racialized suffering. Counter to discourses of resilience that advocate individuals to improve their lives through mindfulness practice by knowing how to adapt as agents of their own well-being, these practitioners draw attention to how the social and political contexts of American race relations produce racialized subjectivities that impact their everyday suffering. Gajaweera explores how creating People of Color (POC) "safe spaces" to meditate encourages practitioners to empathize with the intertwinement of lived experiences with racialized Others and the shared socio-political nature of their emotions. This collective experiencing of racialized embodiment fosters, Gajaweera finds, a type of radical resilience, enabling awareness of collective responsibility, care for community and direct action for racial justice within the individual meditator.

Moving from western interpretations of mindfulness to Buddhist majority countries like Tibet result in similar conceptual disruptions. Sara E. Lewis' ethnography is of members of a Tibetan community and their cultivation of a "spacious mind" as emblematic of a Tibetan Buddhist view of resilience. When it comes to orienting those who are suffering towards recovery, Lewis finds her Tibetan interlocutors advocate for the cultivation of a big or spacious mind by having a willingness to "let go" of experiences of systemic violence. This mode of resilience offered by her interlocutors Lewis finds is an alternative to the Western trauma-informed sensibility that promotes practices of testimony, narrative, and a therapeutic imperative to debrief past experiences of suffering. Indeed, this attitude runs counter to notions of recovery, resilience, and social justice in the Global North where talk therapy models assume that people should talk, share, debrief, and importantly, point out injustice. Yet, Lewis finds, Tibetan Buddhists' insist that talking too much about problems and injustices will only make things worse. Instead, they advocate for mind-training practices based on a set of Buddhist teachings that emphasize shifting from criticizing or changing the external situation and instead turn inward, seeing one's own mind as the root of suffering.

Monica Lindberg Falk examines Buddhist responses to suffering as a result of natural hazards. Drawing on long-term anthropological research carried out in the worst hit areas in Thailand of the Indian Ocean tsunami, Lindberg Falk explores the varied resources, including Buddhist counselling

and ritual observations her Thai interlocutors drew upon from Theravada discourse and practice to face loss and recovery. This contribution emphasizes the relational nature of Buddhist resilience, highlighting how particular Theravada rituals of merit-making and the transference of religious merits to the deceased, vis-a-vis the community of monks help bridge the division between the realms of the dead and the living, while also offering individuals the capacity to go on with their lives. In particular, this contribution offers unique insight into the role that Buddhist monks play in disseminating discourses of impermanence and rituals of merit-making as technologies of resilience in times of crisis, while at the same time critically examining how the authority of male monastic institutions marginalized the capacity of female renunciants to serve the lay community in times of crisis.

Finally, themes of injustice and relating to suffering also emerge in DeAngelo's ethnography of Cambodian Buddhists who have survived a long series of civil wars. In international tribunal models for justice in relation to violence and war crimes an implicit association is made between perpetrator accountability and victim resilience in the face of past trauma. Such a tribunal framing suggests an individualized notion of agency where one person can be held accountable for their actions. DeAngelo's ethnography illustrates a disruption of the strict categorization of perpetrator and victim of suffering through Cambodian Buddhist entangled ideas about metta, Indigenous beliefs of porous bodies, and distributed feelings of accountability. Given this disruption of perpetrator-victim divisions, DeAnglelo's contribution examines how people find resilience and pursue reconciliation in the face of past trauma. When there exists a porousness between persons, even among former enemies, who can be held accountable for that violence—if such porousness conditions that everyone is, at once, perpetrator and victim of suffering?

Together, these papers contribute an ethnographic perspective to resilience and its relation to Buddhist practice. They depict a range of alterities that counter prevailing expectations for how Buddhism is practiced and conceptualized, with mindfulness only being one of the resources contributing to resilience in local settings. These alterities presented here however, do not find the sites or practitioners incommensurable, rather, we see striking conceptual similarities across these radically different locales. Indeed, while "resilience" is sometimes framed as a capacity to return to a past state of equilibrium—to "bounce back"—to a pre-catastrophic state of affairs, what each of our engagements with Buddhist communities and their modes of resilience illustrate is that resilience, like Buddhism, is always already an emergent practice.

Corresponding Authors

Nalika Gajaweera

Center for Religion and Civic Culture

University of Southern California

gajaweer@usc.edu

Darcie DeAngelo

Institute for Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention

Binghamton University

darcie.deangelo@gmail.com

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