

Symposium: New Roads in Theravada Studies

Response Essay

Don't Stop Thinking about Tomorrow Together

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Don't stop thinking about tomorrow

Don't stop, it'll soon be here

It'll be better than before

Yesterday's gone, yesterday's gone.

Why not think about times to come?

And not about the things that you've done.

Fleetwood Mac, "Don't Stop"

There was a period about fifteen years ago when I had frequent occasion to travel to Sri Lanka for activities of the American Institute for Sri Lankan Studies. While on these trips, I sought out opportunities to meet younger academics in Sri Lanka's universities, especially those who were on "probationary" or temporary appointments in the various humanities departments. While no longer an absolute norm, it is a continuing feature of Sri Lankan universities that some are appointed to teaching positions directly after their first degree, that is, after their undergraduate degree, with the expectation that earning a terminal degree, a doctorate, is a condition for their appointment to be made permanent. My meetings with these younger academics were ostensibly to try to help them navigate the obscurities and inevitable challenges of applying to graduate schools in the United States for their PhD studies. For these younger scholars, the stakes were personally high, obviously. I wanted to help them with their challenges, but my own concerns also included the hope that more movements of younger academics back and forth between Sri Lankan and American universities would be conducive for better futures not only for the doctoral students themselves but also for the academic institutions and academic communities in both countries. These meetings were eye-opening for me and left a lasting imprint. I knew that the institutional conditions for everyone studying and teaching in Sri Lanka's universities were "difficult," to say the least. Needs were great while resources are not; workloads were enormous, but compensations are insufficient. But what I

heard from the young lecturers I met—about the impact that these conditions had on their lives, about the burdens they bore and the stresses they endured—went beyond what I had imagined and beyond anything I knew about in American universities, even in these dismal times for higher education in the United States. And still . . .

And still these younger academics were committed.

They were committed to everything that a university can be anywhere, committed to everything that scholarship can do. They seemed already to know fully what Ignacio Ellacuria, S.J., professor and rector at Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas,” meant when he said that “There are two aspects to every university. The first and most evident is that it deals with culture, with knowledge, the use of the intellect. The second, and not so evident, is that it must be concerned with the social reality—precisely because a university is inescapably a social force: it must transform and enlighten the society in which it lives” (Ellacuria 1982). These young Sri Lankan academics were profoundly committed to both of these aspects of universities, Ellacuria’s evident one and the not-so-evident one. Spending time with them, listening to them, gifted me a chance to renew my own commitments as an academic, generally and in particular as a student of the heritages of the Theravada Buddhist traditions who teaches in an American university. What I heard from these young Sri Lankan academics challenged me to think about what I wanted to see tomorrow but they also helped me to look forward to the surprises that tomorrow would bring.

Happy memories of those meetings came back to me when I read and re-read these three essays by Jack Meng-Tat Chia, Alexandra Kaloyanides, and Trent Walker. These essays—and more importantly, their authors—have gifted me a very-welcome chance once again to think about and look forward to tomorrow, to better tomorrows. And the tomorrows that they proffer are not only always inviting; they are also filled with surprises, so much so that my reading of their essays often came with that “click of delight” (*camatkāra*) that South Asian literary theory speaks about so evocatively.

I am of course very grateful to the essays’ authors as well as to the editors who brought the essays together—Alexandra Kaloyanides and Trent Walker for the gracious attention that they have given to my essay, “Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravada Buddhism.” I am also grateful for how generously they have connected my essay to the scholarship of so many others. A Pali sub-commentary on the *Mangalasutta* speaks of friendship as being like a blanket thrown over the seat of an old and worn-out caned chair; the woven cane has broken through in places, but the blanket hides those broken holes and makes the seat comfortable. I can’t help but feel that the three essays here along with the editors’ introduction have done something analogous for “Roads Taken and Not Taken.”

The occasion for these essays may be the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of “Roads Taken and Not Taken,” but I found the appreciative and insightful overviews of scholarship subsequent to its publication especially helpful for taking the measure of our shared field of study. Not only do these overviews remind us just how much has been done, indeed how much more is

known about certain things that collectively we didn't know much about twenty-five years ago, they show us just how internally diverse the study of Theravada Buddhism has become. The overviews of scholarship in the essays also model how to create “usable pasts” as a part of scholarship. Constructing “usable pasts” from received scholarship is, for me, a key academic task and skill. We need ever to historicize ourselves, of course, ever to struggle towards the critical self-consciousness that such historicizing affords, if we are to know where our ideas and practices come from and to know how they are connected with each other with the hope of building on them and moving beyond them to create better tomorrows. And this is the task of constructing a “usable past” and it is a task that no one can do alone, it is a skill that can only be cultivated together with others and with the help of others.

One of the challenges of all scholarship today, just as it was twenty-five years ago, is our acute self-consciousness that the scholarly pasts to which we are heirs and by which we are inevitably shaped are filled with horrors. Our condition is, I think, just as Walter Benjamin describes for the angel found in the famous painting of Paul Klee:

A Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (Benjamin 2007: 257).

Something of the winds of Benjamin's “storm blowing from Paradise” moves in the commitment to scholarship's tomorrows which I mentioned above, and which is quite evident in each of these essays. We also see novel movements of these winds in the individual essays, movements which do much more than just “fill in gaps” in our putative knowledge about Theravada Buddhism. Rather they encourage us to turn—with some dedication—towards futures that were unimaginable (at least for me) twenty-five years ago and they show us ways that we can and should think differently. I can already see that (again, for me at least) there can be no turning away from these futures that these four essays have helped me to glimpse: “a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them.” Feeling the winds of this storm fills me with optimism.

Alexandra Kaloyanides makes reference early in her essay to her forthcoming monograph about religion in nineteenth-century Burma, including the American Baptist mission to Burma. I am already eager to learn from it. When I read her observation that she “would often find American Christian missionaries writing and circulating relatively positive accounts of Buddhism that were clearly based on their interactions with monks and other Burmese people as well as on their studies

of Pali and Burmese manuscripts,” I recognize that she is doing the kind of “reparative reading,” to adopt Eve Sedgwick’s term, that we all need to get better at when we are reading scholarly works not only from the distant past but recent works as well (we are already pretty good generally at what Sedgwick calls “paranoid reading”) (Sedgwick 2003: 123–152). But I had an unexpected click of delight when Alexandra Kaloyanides asks, “Can we tell better stories of Theravada Buddhist communities and creations if there are real spirits, gods, and ghosts in those stories?” Alexandra Kaloyanides connects her thoughts to the generative queries and reflections of Robert Orsi, but what immediately came to my mind reading her open-ended question was the “game-changing” work of Bernard Faure in his monumental *Gods of Medieval Japan* in which he says, “We feel that [the gods] transmit a valuable message about the world and mankind, but we have not yet found a language whose expressive richness rivals theirs. They constantly refer us back to ourselves, revealing the limitations of our conceptual system. . . . Without denying the explanatory value of the dominant sociological, functionalist interpretation of the gods, I want to relativize it: gods are not soluble in the acids of human sciences” (Faure 2015: I, 9).

Trent Walker’s scholarship on Indic-Vernacular Bitexts has already started to appear in publications and in academic talks and presentations. I have already learned much from it and I am eager to see what is yet to come. Scholarship such as his is clearly essential to our understanding and explaining translation as a key cultural practice within the Theravada Buddhist world. Moreover, his work joins others in opening up and illuminating what he calls in his essay “the interactive, multilingual space between regions and cultures” in Southeast Asia, something that was largely invisible to scholarship twenty-five years, but which now challenges us to rethink radically how we understand and explain the relations between the “translocal” and the “local” historically in the Theravada Buddhist world. Another click of delight happened when I looked at Trent Walker’s bibliography and noticed especially the Thai-language scholarship included in it. This I find noteworthy in itself, because it challenges us to imagine how, if our future communities of scholarship are actually to become international, we can find ways of giving each other access to the many scholarly resources available in languages from the contemporary Theravadin world like Thai, Sinhala, Burmese, and so on. As Trent Walker and Alexandra Kaloyanides highlight in their “Introduction:” “Communication across the many languages in which Theravada studies scholarship is produced is often challenging. It seems that English-language work may have become even more dominant, both in quantity and influence, in the quarter century since ‘Roads Taken and Not Taken.’ At the same time, North America-based scholars rarely engage recent secondary sources written in German, Japanese, or Thai, to name only a few of the more active languages in present-day Theravada studies.” The bibliography to Trent Walker’s essay makes it obvious that this is indeed a practical challenge for us to take up collectively for the sake of better tomorrows.

Jack Meng-Tat Chia’s important work on “South China Sea Buddhism,” published in *Monks in Motion: Buddhism and Modernity Across the South China Sea*, reminds us that Theravada Buddhism is not the only kind of Buddhism to be found in modern Southeast Asia. His essay here goes further and helps us to think hard about what is entailed whenever and wherever Theravada Buddhism is a “minority religion.” Indeed, as Jack Meng-Tat Chia’s essay makes abundantly clear, much is entailed,

so much so that we are even challenged to rethink what we may conventionally assume to be the case when Theravada Buddhism is a “majority religion.” This is a general lesson taught by Paul Mus long ago in his classic essay (1933), “India Seen from the East.” Jack Meng-Tat Chia’s essay, drawing our attention to recent studies on Theravada Buddhism in maritime Southeast Asia, highlights how this “burgeoning scholarship . . . shifts the usual geographical focus away from Sri Lanka and mainland Southeast Asia” and as I took this in self-consciously as a student of Sri Lanka, there was yet another click of delight when I found myself anticipating learning from future scholarship about “Thailand seen from the South” and “Colombo seen from Singapore.”

Alexandra Kaloyanides and Trent Walker remind us in their “Introduction” that there are also important issues that fall outside [the] purview” of these essays. This is no doubt true but how could it not be? Some of these important issues have become visible as we expand the scope of what is considered relevant whenever we study the worlds of Theravada Buddhism, whether that be aspects of life previously ignored, such as economics and material culture, or newly-emerging domains of expressivity, such as cinema and digital culture. Other issues become visible whenever we connect the interpretive and explanatory practices that we inherit to those emerging in other areas of the human sciences. Each of these essays finds inspiration and resources in scholarship outside the field of Theravada Buddhist Studies, and they also suggest futures in which the study of Theravada Buddhism can offer inspiration and resources to academic laborers in other fields. In this, these three essays are exemplary, but it is nonetheless obvious that there are many other new roads which we can collectively take, such as those made possible by the new tools of geographic analysis and the unfolding theories of network analysis. But just like Benjamin’s angel of history, we still have to keep our faces “turned toward the past,” towards the roads we have already taken represented by the history of the scholarship which we inherit. “Roads Taken and Not Taken,” beginning as it does with an allusion in its title to an essay by Edward Said, is very much a period piece, concerned as it is with suggesting a way forward towards a “post-Orientalist” scholarship. It seems to me now, looking back over the past twenty years, that for every step forward, it has been necessary to take two steps back and reconsider our scholarly inheritance more self-consciously and more historically. Today, we are just beginning to connect the history of the basic categories that we routinely use in the study of Buddhism, like culture, religion, and “Theravada Buddhism” itself, to the formation of connected discourses of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and embodiment more generally. Adeana McNicholl, for example, has challenged all of us to explore how “Orientalist visions of Buddhism and the “Asian East” were crafted side-by-side with other racial discourses” (McNicholl 2018: 236). McNicholl also encourages us to affirm that when we become better aware of our own racialized subject positions as students of Buddhism, we have a chance to become more alert—and hopefully more resistant—to the perduring impact of white privilege in American universities, with its tacit yet routine perversions of knowledge. Better histories of how our assumptions, ideas, and practices came to have the form they do will surely provide some of the necessary conditions for better scholarship in the future. It will be the kind of scholarship that will help our universities transform and enlighten the societies in which they live, as Ellacuria called for.

There used to be a sign on an outside wall of the Graduate School of Design at Harvard that I often took note of when I walked by. It said, “It’s a big job. That’s why we are doing it.” In the essays that they have gifted us here, Alexandra Kaloyanides, Jack Meng-Tat Chia, and Trent Walker, remind us that the study of Theravada Buddhism is indeed a big job, and there are many things that we still need to do. They also help us to see anew why we are doing it. Most importantly, however, they remind us that as we continue to take up this big job as best as we can, it will always behoove us not ever to stop thinking about tomorrow together. The results will surely be new roads worth taking.

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